

BENEATH THE MASK



A Vampire: The Masquerade™ Fiction
Written by: Chris Ironside

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August 2, 1999. 2:43 AM.

Breaths came in sucking jerks. Heart pounded like a machine, feeling like it was tearing itself apart piece by piece. Pain pierced hot and sharp, held in the palm like melting glass, impossible to put down. Ears rang with the echo of tortured screaming, but not loud enough to drown out the steps. Slow, measured. Searching and yet wandering. The meander is forced, it knows where she is and is toying with her. Throat vibrates with a muffled sob, hitching breaths hiss constrained against a hand clamped over wet lips to try to disappear. Closet door rattles and a low, malicious chuckle rises outside. "Come out, come out, wherever you are," singsongs the voice that blurs the darkness behind a veil of tears.

Kelly opened her eyes and withdrew the light touch of her fingertips from the blood-slick handle of the kitchen knife she had found in the closet. She rose in the small space, for a moment the psychic impression of clinging darkness and

fear overlaid with the electrically-bright cache of Walmart-special wardrobe. “She died afraid,” Kelly said, and thought she managed to suppress the thickness of empathy entirely. “Jesus,” Gory said, sounding ill. Kelly’s sharp senses picked out the rustle of flesh against cloth as he stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Look at her, of course she died afraid.”

Kelly did look and forced herself to face it. Face her, the woman who had vainly covered her own mouth to try to hide from the man who stalked her. She would have had a nice figure, yesterday. The muscles were toned and lean, a runner or swimmer maybe. She was hairless where she was expected to be hairless, groomed in other more intimate areas. She would have had a nice, flat stomach if it did not currently appear to have been subjected to the scrabbling claws of some kind of oversized rat. Almost as if for modesty, a loop of intestine coiled along the slit of her sex and crack of her ass, a glistening gusset between slightly parted legs. Ribs akimbo: the digging had not stopped at the spine and abdomen, but seemed to have burrowed up under the breastplate and into the heart and lungs. It had forced aside the bone armor from the inside. The throat was a ravaged mess; it looked like someone had pulled the artery from the ragged meat and sucked on it. Kelly’s enhanced vision could pick out the teeth marks, flat and even, where the jugular had been held like a straw.

Kelly looked up at the sandy-colored Gangrel. His broad shoulders and narrow waist always screamed athlete to her, even when they were hunched down and shaving a few inches from his six-foot height. His slightly-longer-than five o’clock shadow stretched up in a patchy line along his square jaw, and he lifted a hand to scratch at it. Short nails dug into pallid, firm flesh that didn’t seem as pliant to the pressure as a mortal’s might. He turned haunted grey eyes

back to her and she lifted her brows at him.

“No, I mean she was stalked. I’m guessing she either stumbled on the scene downstairs, maybe interrupted it, or he knew there were two people in the house when he came in.”

From the other room, Kelly could hear the low, sincere insistence of Jonas’s voice. “It was a home invasion gone wrong. Nothing suspicious.” A wooden voice, male, answered with a repetition. “Probably gang related, no sense in looking too hard.” Another repetition, and Kelly glanced down at her watch. He had better hurry, the patrolman’s partner downstairs was scheduled to awaken in three minutes. Kelly forced her eyes back up to the body and dug in her jacket pocket for the soft pack of Marlies.

“Gimme one of those, will you?” Gory asked, and glanced away sheepishly when Kelly looked up in surprise. She felt a pang of guilt and tossed the pack lightly toward him.

“Here,” she warned as she loosed it. He looked around and snagged it out of the air. “Don’t say I never did anything for you since you keep bringing me to all the nicest places.”

Oh God, he’s coming. He knows I’m here. Danny. Oh God, Danny.

Kelly blinked and shuddered out of the shawl of the lingering psychic energy. She hoped Gory took it as a reaction to the flicker of flames from the lighter he dug out of the cigarette pack. “Just like old times, right?” he answered as he stuffed the lighter away. He tossed the pack back. He was trying to put a brave face on it but he was shaken; his act was so obvious that Jonas would probably be able to tell, and Kelly survived by her ability to read what went unsaid.

“Just like old times,” she agreed distractedly and bent next to the body. Sitting on her heels, she canted her head and

met the woman's wide, sightless eyes directly. "Who's Danny?" she wondered in a whisper, though she didn't realize it until Gory's sound of confusion surprised her. Kelly scowled and dragged her eyes away from the body to scan the room.

It was a study, no valuables. Dry texts on calculating credits and debits and managing payroll deductions. Binders marked with indicators of current regulations and tax code clauses. A filing cabinet, apparently untouched except for the arc of arterial spurt, with three drawers of what Kelly suspected were clients. The police would spend weeks going through every name, every address. Or would have, if Jonas were not ensuring that the first responders remembered a very different scene.

Why do you cry blood? It scares me. Julie's voice, half-asleep and slurred with booze and dreams, rose unbidden in her memory. The woman who had shared a dorm room, and then an apartment, throughout Kelly's time at college in Boston, had her own set of tampered memories. Kelly could practically see her best friend's face, confused and afraid, at the end of her Glock, if she tried. More often than not, she didn't, but sometimes the memory of what she had been prepared to do to protect the Masquerade came to visit unexpectedly. The police might have dreams (*nightmares*) about what they had seen tonight, but that would be easily dismissed as shock at the nature of the scene.

The computer was undamaged and powered down, the drawers unsearched. Thin plastic sheeting draped over the shoulders of the hangers in the closet, protecting the \$10 investment the shirts and jeans and slacks and sweaters represented from time and weather. It told her the space was storage and not actively used. Why this room? Why would she flee here? There was no way out except the door

to the hallway and the window behind the desk that overlooked a two story drop to the brick walkway that led up to the front door. Thunder rumbled, wandering its way away from the city it had so recently heckled. Why come here? Who was Danny?

Kelly straightened and finally lit her cigarette. “Did you see a wallet downstairs? Pants?” she asked around the filter. Gory shook his head and Kelly gave a short nod of acknowledgement.

Jonas came in, rubbing his forehead between his knitted brows as if warding off a headache. Downstairs, the front door closed. The bookish man in the off-the-rack suit, with his disheveled coif of dark hair and thin-framed window-glass specs, leaned against the door to the room and put on a much more convincing act of unconcern with the room’s fourth, just as dead but unmoving, occupant on the floor. But Kelly could see the way he avoided looking in that direction, and the cross of his arms over his chest was just a little too tense for the natural ease he was trying to project. “Alright, they’re taken care of. What’ve you got?” He had good voice control. He was more pragmatic about these things than Gory was. He sought to emulate Kelly’s cool detachment, just as she emulated Lucina’s. She forced the consideration aside and the brief jolt of pity she felt for what it meant for him to walk that path as she refocused on the task at hand.

“It was one man. He toyed with her,” she reported, and tried to keep her tone moderated to the facts-only delivery she would use in a deposition. “Dragged her out of this closet and took the knife from her. Tossed it in the closet to keep it out of the way, I’d say. If he used one himself, he brought it with him and it left with him, or it’s stashed somewhere else in the house. I don’t know yet; this isn’t

really an exact science.”

“One man, or one *man!*” Jonas asked, stressing the repetition. Kelly shook her head.

“I don’t know yet,” she admitted. Jonas looked mildly vexed and rose from his lean to stand crossly in the archway.

“I agreed to this Mask thing to cover up Masquerade violations, not to play private dick and track down mortal serial killers. Let them handle their own...” Kelly didn’t entirely know what it was in her stare or expression that cut off the words so abruptly that it was as if his throat had been slit mid-sentence, but she had her suspicions. She was just glad it took no more than a look, and she carefully hauled back on the leash of her Beast that had slipped to the end of its slack.

“If you would like me to speculate, I would say that yes, we are dealing with a kindred,” Kelly said coolly after a few seconds, to let the look do its work, and she marshalled her control. “I don’t know for sure, yet. But I will. Does that satisfy, Mr. Myabb?”

“Y-yeah,” Jonas agreed and ran a hand back through his hair. The way it tumbled right back into its specific disarray told her volumes about his grooming bills every month. “Sorry, just tired. Takes a lot out of you to twiddle like that.”

Kelly’s answering smile was bitterness restrained into a loose form of sympathy as she flashed back to the feel of heart hammering against ribs and adrenaline making fingers numb and tingly around the clutched hilt of a kitchen knife. “Yes, I do appreciate how much you’re put out by this duty and thank you again for attending it.”

Gory was making a ‘cut it out’ gesture by dragging his thumb across his throat at Jonas. He thought Kelly couldn’t hear the shift of cloth or the drag of nail across

preternaturally dense flesh, and she didn't disabuse him of the notion. Jonas's gaze ticked up over Kelly's shoulder and then back and he nodded. "Yeah, no problem. Glad to help," he relented.

Kelly pushed past him back into the upstairs hall and stopped outside the door. She pulled smoke into her lungs and held it just to feel it burn as she looked up and down the hallway. It felt like the burn of lungs managing only panting gasps and she released the cloud and the memory together.

Four more doors in this hall, one half-width like a closet. One at the end, cracked and showing a nightlight's weak illumination in the seam. Bathroom, probably. Bedroom for the couple, but what was the third door?

Kelly glanced at her watch. It was after three o'clock. Wilkes would be off shift soon; morning would be coming. She glanced back toward the stairs and the trail of bloody foot prints that led up and into the door behind her. By tomorrow night, the impressions may have faded. She had learned that even strong ones might degrade over time, and while the broad strokes may linger—*would* given the ferocity of this attack—the details would become hazy, confused. She didn't have time to check both directions, handle the preservation of the scene, *and* put together a clear picture of what had transpired here. Maybe, if she were lucky, catch a glimpse of whoever the man with the singsong voice was. Kelly started for the stairs.

Her fingers trailed down the banister, and her eyes drifted half closed as she focused. She tasted the panic as a step was missed and a stumble averted by the grip that left a bloody handprint on the painted wood, and moved on. The rounded newel post and the smear of a palm print in crimson around its equator gave her another echo of the

woman's voice, another cry for Danny. For Danny? Kelly paused and scowled with focus and tried to delve deeper, but like the trailer of smoke from her cigarette, the impression seemed to have evaporated into thin air. She had thought, for a moment, that it was not a sob *about* Danny, but *for* Danny. She glanced back up the stairs and saw Myabb and Gory standing above, watching expectantly. She put them out of her mind and continued down.

A broader splotch of blood oozed its way down the white-painted walls, and Kelly took up the smoldering cigarette in her other hand. She reached to touch her fingertips to the palm. Hot, blinding rage filled her. A need to destroy so powerful that her own muscles clenched with the sympathetic desire. Her fangs ached with the thirst, too. There was so much hatred, and finally a way to let it out, she had to let it out, it was going to come... Kelly withdrew her hand from the bloody palm print with a hiss, as if it had burned her. "What?" Gory asked, worried, above, but she ignored him.

She knew that hunger and that need. Oh, she knew it so well. "*This is not you.*" "*It's all of us.*" Astrid's voice and Kelly's bitter reply floated through her memory. Her fangs still throbbed, as if she could feel the core and root of them in fine detail, and could, if asked, draw a map of them on the instant. "Well," Kelly grated at last, with a light flick of her head to pull the pointed teeth out of sight. "You may safely assume you have confirmation that this *is* a matter for the Mask, Jonas. I do hope that assuages your objections to involvement."

"Well, I," Jonas began, but Kelly didn't bother to acknowledge either the embarrassment or the implied apology in the way the statement trailed off. She headed down the stairs to the living room and the man. She kept

her hands well clear of the banister on the way down; she had no more need to sense the echo of the woman's flight. Were you Danny, Kelly wondered as the floor below seeped into view halfway down the switchback.

Naked, like the woman above, he was instead on his belly. His wounds were no less savage, and seemed in fact more lingering. She paused as she wondered why she should think that and let her gaze trail over the scene to indulge the wriggling of suspicion. Details sprang into a hint of motion, a timeline of events described in half-glimpsed nuances and subtle indications. Like watching a clock run backwards, Kelly formed an understanding of some of the events that led to this end. To his end.

His back was as ferociously savaged as the woman's abdomen had been. The wound pattern was similar, in most places, like a rodent's claw but nearly as large as a woman's hand. But at the center, the crater that left blood-soaked carpet visible through the back, there was a dragging gouge. Teeth—fangs—had bitten through his spine. Kelly didn't notice how she lifted her chin to scent the air lightly as she began to contemplate the blood pool around the man. It was, she decided, too small and too large at once. It was too small for it to be his healthy dose, and too large to be what was left from a frenzied feeding.

Her gaze tracked back to what she had first thought to be drag marks from the front hall leading away from the door. New details as she studied more closely sprang into view. What she had at first taken for the clumsy footsteps of uniformed officers and a hurried search for whoever would leave the carnage they had discovered was not all merely scene corruption. She spotted where, elbows and forearms smearing and slipping wetly, the man had dragged himself from the hall toward the living room. She followed the line of his progress forward to the places he would never reach,

and her gaze came to rest on the phone sitting beside an armchair. He'd made it that far before the man finished upstairs and came back for him. Maybe five minutes, less if the shock of the initial wound had been controlled. She saw the mouthful of jagged bone and torn flesh at last, half tucked behind the round leg of a side table by the door. The small pool of blood in which it sat was watery with straw-colored spinal fluid that didn't seem to quite want to mix with the unstirred blood.

"It's fucking creepy when you do that, you know," Jonas said from directly behind Kelly's shoulder. She almost reached for the gun under her coat but stopped the motion just before she closed her hand around the butt. Gory's tired sigh came from a few stairs higher. She hadn't heard them come down.

"So sorry you object," Kelly replied dryly and glanced down at the stub of cigarette blackened and cold at her hip. She stuffed it into the pocket of her jeans. "Alright, it looks like it went down like this..."

Kelly stepped as lightly as if she were whirling with Wendy, or Lucina, on a ballroom floor. The dance was led by the cool-but-melodious chant of details, and her fingertips followed as deftly as any ballerina. She described the blitz attack, how they came to the door and opened it for the kindred, how he lunged, bit the man low, and crippled him as she fled. A touch of carpet brought, for her, the experience of it, the pain and cold numbness that should be pain and screamed in the head like pain, but wasn't pain. The fear beat like the rhythm of the band as she described how the woman had fled upstairs, how the kindred had pursued, how she had ducked into the office to try to hide from him as he came up the stairs behind.

She pointed to the evidence that described the return, the layering of boot prints, the splash of blood and its drip, even as she plunged into the hatred throbbing raw and open in the crimson flesh of what remained in echo. She wanted the man to hurt like she hurt, she wanted him to suffer. She felt the confusion when she found only a bloody streak on the carpet where the man should be and the thrill of discovery as the agonized grunting drew her attention to the living room. She told her partners how she had loved to rip into the flesh, but it was not—entirely—the thing of frenzy. Abandon, without question, but not the Beast's unfocused thirst.

“But why,” she finished as she scowled at the man, face down and ripped through so that his innards were heaved around the room in dripping chunks, “are they naked? And who is Danny?”

Kelly glanced at her watch and tried to ignore the headache forming in her own temples. Not enough time. It seemed, Kelly mused, that time was only in short supply when you needed it most. A subtle tingle of apprehension passed across the nape of her neck, and she was sure that if her body were capable of it, the hairs there would be standing on end. She looked up, helpless to ignore the premonition.

A tiny spot, the wear of aging deferred from the paint at the edge of a picture hung in the front hall, caught her eye and she stalked toward it abruptly enough that Gory all but leaped back out of her way. She reached out and nudged the picture to cover the lighter patch of paint. “I don't really think this is the time for interior decorating, do you?” Gory asked a bit snidely to cover his haste in getting out of her path. She ignored him. The frame on the far side now bared the tiny seam of protected wall.

“Go, hurry,” she ordered, and unconsciously backed the

command with a blush of her awesome presence. “Find me a picture anywhere in this house that shows them together; family, friends, vacations, anything. Go!” Twenty minutes and they would be racing the sunrise. It wasn’t enough time, but Kelly rushed, too. She had to make sure this stayed quiet. Kelly reached for her phone and hit a speed dial.

“Lieutenant Wilkes,” came the tired reply after six rings. She felt dimly guilty for what she was about to do, but she shoved it aside with a balm of urgent necessity.

“Wilkes, it’s Kelly,” she greeted brusquely and talked right over his suddenly-bright reply. The blood bond was such an insidiously wonderful set of manacles. “We have a situation. There’s been a home invasion at 83 Chestnut. A sicko who kicked in a door and went crazy, Wilkes, are we clear?” She waited only long enough to hear the scratch of pencil on paper and his hurried acknowledgement before continuing. “I want your most trustworthy people on this, and you double check every report and paper before it’s filed. There were no witnesses to question, so don’t bother sending uniforms out to canvas. And Wilkes?” she added in a somewhat softer tone. She wondered briefly that she didn’t have to try very hard to fake it.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” The grin she could hear in his reply churned her stomach and she cut the call off. Myabb and Gory returned, shaking their heads. “Alright,” she announced. “I can’t get you back across town, Gory. You’re staying at my place today. Jonas, first thing tomorrow I want you following up with those uniforms. Double check the report they filed.” He scowled in response but couldn’t hold her gaze for more than a pair of seconds and gave a nod as

he looked away.

“Could always stay at mine,” Gory offered with a grin. “I think I got an old fridge that still locks. Maybe.”

“I’ll put you up in the tower room; just make the bed when you wake up in the evening,” Kelly replied dryly as she started for the street and the performance car sitting poised at the curb. She glanced up at the street light that should have been gleaming above it, and found the bulb smashed. A quick look up and down the street showed it to be the only light out of order. Jonas started off for his own modest sedan on the curb behind Kelly’s ride. She thought of the DeVito/Schwarzenegger movie *Twins* that Gordon and Dorst had been watching the other week. Gory climbed down into the passenger seat of the Dodge and Kelly brought the car to life.

“That was weird, with the pictures, right?” Gory asked as she glided away from the curb and dug for her cigarettes. “I mean, why take all the pictures?”

“I can think of a lot of reasons to do that,” Kelly answered and lifted her foot from the clutch to guide the car with her knee as she shielded the flame from Gory and puffed. Plastic lighter clattered in the side console as she tossed it aside. “I’m more curious about why he replaced them. They were completely blank. I got nothing from them, even though the rest of the time he was throwing off impressions like a volcano.”

“Maybe there was more than one,” Gory suggested, but Kelly shook her head. The kindred’s hatred had an all-too-familiar pang of loneliness in it. It was the kind of violent revolt that had sung an aria of joy as she shredded Mayhew’s arm in a wood chipper. Its release was as intimate as masturbation.

“No, he was alone,” she assured quietly, sincerely. “He

wouldn't do that in front of someone else. It was his."

"You sound like you know him, for Chrissakes, Kelly," Gory winced.

"I know him as well as you do," she said, her voice weighted with implication as she cut a glance at him through the strobe of streetlights passing overhead. Gory didn't answer immediately, but studied his hands in his lap.

"Listen, Kelly, when I was upstairs looking for pictures," he began, but trailed off and glanced out the window. "One of the rooms at the end of the hall..."

"Was a child's room," Kelly supplied gently when he trailed off. She didn't glance to meet the gaze he turned sharply in her direction. *Danny*. "I'm going to guess blue, with baseball or football as the theme."

"You scare the shit out of me, Kelly," Gory admitted frankly. Kelly gave him a tight smile to feign having taken it as a joke.

"He wasn't in there, though," Kelly said as she turned back to the road.

"How did you...?"

"No blood in the hall or glass in the yard. He wasn't making any particular effort to cover his tracks." The kindred *could* have been trying to remove evidence of his association with the family by taking the pictures, but Kelly strongly doubted it. Nothing about this attack was intended to go hidden for longer than it took to enact it. "Wherever Danny is, I'm pretty sure finding him one way or the other will be how we get to the kindred."

Gory's silence was thick with discomfort and Kelly dampened her senses so that it didn't stifle her. A few minutes of quiet later and she was punching in the code to

the wrought-iron gate across the foot of her drive. The two of them jogged to safety with only minutes to spare before the daylight sleep of the damned overtook them.

August 2, 1999. 8:13 PM.

Wendy filled her senses as she woke the following evening. Kelly was still dressed, but lightly covered by the heavy comforter anyways. The scent of Wendy, not near enough to be still in bed but fresh and vibrant and so in the room, filled Kelly's nose. The sedate pulse of heart and restful tide of breathing placed her at the writing desk. She smelled excitement in the bed, hours old. Kelly opened her eyes and saw at last the clear image she had formed in her mind's eye as she rolled onto her side and propped her head on her palm to watch the woman in the sheer nightgown bent over the diary on the desk.

For several seconds Kelly merely drank in the lustrous wave of Wendy's shoulder-length chestnut hair, and the soft line of her shoulder under the cotton skin of her nightgown. The studious bent of her posture made Kelly smile. She would have liked to know Wendy at school, she thought. She would have been able to watch her study for hours. Wendy's hand moved in short, precise swoops as she wrote in the delicate, compact script that Kelly could savor with her eyes for whole nights. The way she folded her left leg under her right knee on the chair, and the twitch and wriggle of pink toes that seemed to link hand and foot broadened Kelly's smile.

"Couldn't wait for me to wake up, eh?" Kelly inquired languidly, eyes half-lidded in anticipation of the alluring rush of heartbeat and gasp of startled breath from her mortal lover. She was no more disappointed in them than she was in her near-prescience of her surroundings.

“I’m going to stop being here when you wake if you keep doing that to me. It’s positively unnerving, Kelly, and it doesn’t help that you seem to like seeing me squeak like a mouse,” she complained light-heartedly as she turned in the chair to smile warmly at Kelly. Kelly gave a smoky chuckle and tried to smother the predatory delight she felt when Wendy did the squeaking. “Cut it close this morning, did you?”

“Hm?” Kelly inquired, then glanced down at the jacket and jeans and felt the weight of her shoulder holster against her ribs. “Oh,” she answered herself. “Yeah, a little. Something came up.” She flashed on the bodies, the blood, the echo of wanting to strip down and revel in the oceans of it, and shoved them down. She didn’t want to think about that yet. “You didn’t answer my question. I can tell you’ve been naughty without me.”

Wendy snorted. “It’s not fair, you know.” A light blush rose to her cheeks and she turned back to the desk and fussed with her diary. “Well, if you want the truth, it’s kind of exciting to think you might wake at any moment, and to try to be as quiet and close to you as I can when I...”

Gordon’s athletic frame came through the doors, clippers and barber’s smock in hand, and Wendy cut off with another squeak. She glared at the olive-skinned man sharply enough that he gave Kelly a questioning look. The blush in Wendy’s cheeks and reddening her ears was warm to Kelly even from across the room. Kelly gave Gordon a nod, and whatever Wendy’s glare he would not disobey his mistress; he entered. Kelly rose from the bed and stripped out of her clothes from the night before to take up her vanity chair and let Gordon set about her beauty routine.

Wendy cleared her throat and studied her diary cover again

for several seconds as the blush faded, and then Kelly watched in the mirror as she padded over to the bed and pulled Kelly's Glock from the holster. The clippers were buzzing away the day's full growth of Kelly's ringlets as Wendy slid the magazine free and checked it, then checked the presence of a round in the chamber. "Well at least you haven't fired it recently," Wendy said, reloading the gun.

"Wouldn't you rather know I went down fighting?" Kelly asked dryly to Wendy's reflection as the gun was tossed back on the bed. "I'd hate to think you weren't proud of me in my last moments."

"I'd rather you not go down at all," Wendy scowled right back at her, and then reddened again as Kelly merely met the gaze with an insinuating smile. "That's not what I...!" she sputtered, but then glanced at Gordon. From the corner of her eye, Kelly could see Gordon trying very hard not to appear to be paying attention. The dull throb of warmth at his waist, pulsing faintly between her shoulder blades when he thought of Kelly and Wendy together, gave him away.

"I know it's not what you meant, but no, I wasn't in any gunfights last night," Kelly soothed.

"I don't honestly know if that's better, or worse," Wendy admitted at last and sighed.

"What do you mean?"

"If I know you, you have something to do with this." Wendy reached for a folded newspaper at the corner of the writing desk. "You can tell me there are things I don't get to know if you like, but please don't deny that this is somehow mixed up with...with you kindred."

Kelly lifted a finger to wave Gordon off as she snaked an arm out from under the smock to look at the headline. "SPREE KILLER ON THE LOOSE!" it proclaimed. The

standfirst read, “Four dead as officials claim gang violence to blame.” Kelly sighed and skimmed the copy.

The report explained how the police had initially denied that the crimes were related until an ‘unnamed source’ had confided to the author that there were marked similarities. Details were sketchy, speculation rampant. It was a shade of journalism that tended toward tooth-yellow. The crimes were sensational and brutal enough that several blocks of black ink were devoted to their ode. Much assurance of apology was implied for readers and victims alike for their nature and details. It was, Kelly thought, as obscene a display as the bodies from the morning before. She tossed the paper to the floor beside the chair.

“No, I won’t deny I’m involved and, yes, it is a matter that you don’t get to know more than the papers find out about, but I’m not covering tracks for someone who will do this again.” This time, she added silently.

“Oh, I didn’t mean...” Wendy blinked and hastened to assure. Kelly soothed her with a lifted hand as the clippers resumed their breakfast.

“I know,” Kelly said gently. “It was a bad joke. I’m sorry.” She essayed a smile in the mirror and it seemed to be enough to settle Wendy. The mortal climbed into bed and pulled up the covers.

“I’ve had a helluva day. Since you have a full plate, I thought I’d turn in early. Tuck me in before you go out to save the world tonight?”

“How could I refuse?” Kelly returned with a smile, and endured Wendy’s adoring gaze as Gordon finished and she dressed.

With a touch of corpse-cold lips on warm brow, Kelly bid Wendy good night and closed the door on the mortal and

the warm smile she had held for her benefit. A brief scan of the sounds from the house told her Gory and Dorst were in the sitting room, engaged in a digital war. Kelly left them to it and her loafers were silent on the thick hall carpet as she went for the office.

Kelly took up the receiver from the desk phone and was dialing into her own private tip line before she was even fully seated in the swiveling chair. Pen and legal pad at hand, she jotted notes as she listened to the various messages. As she suspected they might be, the tips and rumors fed to her were weighted heavily with mention of the day's grisly discoveries. The messages from the morning's batch were almost exclusively related to behind the scenes investigator chatter. Then, a brief warning that someone at the Milwaukee Sun had gotten a scoop from a CSI tech that came in from a mail boy at the paper. She jotted, collated, notated and discarded the flow of information until the script, arrows, numbers and shorthand notes looked more like some kind of arcane ritual than a string of telephone messages.

Two messages stood out. A cabbie of her acquaintance, kept well-supplied with work from the delivery side job she had arranged with Milwaukee Menswear, had called in just before dawn. He had seen a man that looked like he was covered in blood trying to hide in a dumpster behind Moo Shoo Palace in the Rack. Another call, one of the most recent, from Scut, her eyes and ears in that district, was just as interesting. He thought he'd seen a strange kindred in the same area and was investigating. He'd get back to her if it panned out and hoped she remembered his good work. She had, though, already rewarded the caitiff as thoroughly as she dared without embarrassing herself.

Kelly tapped her pen on the pad and focused on her desire to have Gory at her side. From elsewhere in the house she

heard the clatter of a controller on marble floor and a shouted, “Jesus, fuck! What the hell!?” Heavy, booted steps charged up the stairs and she had just enough time to wonder if he was about to barrel through the office door, rather than open it, when the knob turned. Gory burst into the room hard enough that the door banged hard against the stop.

“What the hell was that? Are you okay? I just suddenly...” He scowled at her as she turned to face him in the swivel chair and rose. If a kindred could be said to bristle, Gory was bristling. “What did you just do to me?” he oozed menacingly.

“It’s nothing really,” Kelly soothed. “I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t already know you were close, or else was in great danger. Sorry if it was uncomfortable.” His scowl didn’t ease, but the tense threat in his posture did. He cut his glance at the pad in her hand.

“You got something?” He seemed to latch onto the change of subject as a balm to his temper, and Kelly encouraged it.

“I think so. I think I found where our killer went to ground for the day, and may have a lead on where he’s at tonight.” When Gory’s eyes shot to hers with the dreadful question bright in their gleam, Kelly shook her head. “No, not more bodies. Not yet, anyways. Did you see the paper yet?”

Gory shook his head. “No, but Dorst was telling me about it. Guess we missed one, eh?”

“I guess so,” Kelly agreed with an edge of bitterness in the tone. “But so did everyone else, it looks like. That, or the cops are keeping it back. There was no mention of the kids at all.”

“Kids? I thought you said there was only one, this Danny.” Kelly nodded. “One at that house. I’d bet my fangs there

was another at the second scene. I bet they didn't find any family pictures, either."

"This has got to be a Lunatic, right? Doesn't it?" he pressed when Kelly didn't reply at once.

"I don't know, Gory," she admitted. She had memories of her own, not the echoes of those stolen from the impressions left by the power of their creation. They were of abandon and bloodshed on the same scale as that inflicted on the couple—couples, she reminded herself—from the night before. "I don't think it's always as easy as that, do you?"

"Why are we friends?" Gory asked in mock exasperation. "You are supposed to tell me what I want to hear."

"Oh, honey," Kelly countered primly. "That would be no fun at all, for either of us. Besides, I put you in your Primogeniture. That's why we're still friends."

Gory snorted and crossed his arms. The amusement went out of him and he looked away from her. Kelly could see him forming his next words and gave him the handful of seconds he needed for the task. "Yeah, about that. I've been thinking."

"I thought we established a long time ago that you're supposed to leave that to me," Kelly countered lightly, and got a forced ghost of smile in return.

"You're Lucina's Seneschal. I'm the Primogen of the Gangrel and Decker's finally starting to act like it. Before, with the werewolf killings and Merrick, we were nobodies. It made sense for us to be running around with guns and chasing leads. But maybe we can sit this one out. I've got a bad feeling about this one. Maybe we leave this to Myabb and let a couple up and comers get a shot."

It was tempting, Kelly admitted. She could, in a moment or three, have a team of capable and motivated kindred

combing the city. Her phone was her most powerful weapon and tool, and she felt like she could turn the entire city inside out in a few hours in order to find this killer kindred.

But she wouldn't reach for the weight in her pocket. She realized that her determination to see this through herself was not rooted in her desire to avenge the dead she had confronted the night before. She had felt a kinship in the glimpses of the kindred she had siphoned from the scene.

She felt like she had to look the kindred in the eyes and see if they held the light of conscience and intelligence that she saw in her own reflection.

"Man up, Gory," Kelly chided with a small grin and a chuck on the shoulder as she went past him to the hall. "You're the first taxidermist I've met who got squeamish at the sight of a little blood and meat." She laughed lightly, forced herself to laugh lightly, when Gory pointed out he was the only taxidermist she'd met. The two of them headed downstairs, where Gordon had taken up Gory's place on the couch with the controller. Gory waved him off as Gordon glanced over and offered it back, and Kelly's sometimes-bodyguards, sometimes-investigators, sometimes-lovers dove back into their digital distraction. Kelly walked Gory to the door.

"You want me to call Eric to give you a ride? I want to check on a few things or I'd offer to drive you myself," she said as the front door closed. She fished for cigarettes and found her pack had only one. Reluctantly, she offered it to Gory, though whether he noted her reluctance or from simple disinterest he declined.

The lighter flicked and sparked behind her cupped hand as he replied, "Nah, I'll call a cab. I got my cell and some cash.

I want to call around with the Anubi and see if maybe anything like this got scratched off as garou activity recently. Never know what Decker's hushed up, sometimes." Kelly nodded and exhaled smoke.

"Be careful," she cautioned, and Gory nodded. He started off toward the gate and Kelly watched him disappear into the night. She was straining so hard to hear his footsteps over the slow crackle of burning paper from her cigarette that the sudden trill of her phone startled her. She dropped the smoke and ground it under the toe into the drive as she dug out the phone and answered. "Kelly Patterson," she announced.

"It's Jonas," came the clipped tone. "I followed up with those cops, they don't remember anything I didn't want them to. I guess you've seen the news by now?"

"I have," she agreed and started inside. "Good work on those two, though. It will help shore up the narrative nicely, I'm certain. I've got a lead or two myself on where our subject might be staying, and I'll let you know if anything comes up that you're needed for."

"So nice to be needed," was the dry reply. He might gripe, but he was willing to trade on the prestige of the appointment enough to put the work into earning it, and that was enough for her. At least, for now. "You don't need back up?"

"Sometimes I work best alone," Kelly countered smoothly as she stopped inside only long enough to grab her keys. "Sweet of you to offer, but I just sent Gory on in a cab. If I thought I was in trouble I'd have asked him to tag along. No offense, but I've *seen* him take a punch."

"So have I, and none taken," Jonas was quick to assure. "You have my number."

"I do," Kelly agreed and disconnected the call. A few

minutes later and she was coursing the streets of Milwaukee, headed to the neon dimness of the Rack.

August 2, 1999. 9:34 PM.

Kelly's car, her pantsuit, and her shoes made her an enticing mark in this part of town. Women and men of various descriptions offered themselves from the corners without even a glimpse of the form behind the tinted windows; remoras looking to attach themselves to the predator gliding and glittering in their waters. Dealers eyed the car like competition or danger, with hands tucked into jackets, or held low out of sight at the hip, but they still flashed the powders and pill bottles that served as their advertisement. Strip clubs promised the hottest girls, and Jello wrestling on Saturdays. Here and there darker shadows hunched in alleys, like anemones waiting for the unwary to pass by and be captured. Some of those had fangs, and backed away in recognition of the car.

The purr of the engine came to a halt in the street below the backlit yellow plastic sign of the Moo Shoo Palace. The broad windows that looked in on the dingy joint were smoky with pollution and a layer of evaporated grease from inside, to the point where only humanoid splotches of color moved within. If the kindred had come here to rest he could have walked right past the front window and no one would have noticed, Kelly observed. She glanced up and down the street, taking in the state of the public lighting, but found no obvious pattern in the lights that were out. Many people in these neighborhoods had their reasons for wanting the lights broken, and they were not shy about doing it.

Kelly stepped up onto the sidewalk and glanced around. A

trio of mortals, catcalling the car and passing a bagged bottle around a stoop nearby, saw who emerged from the car and decided this was worth standing for. Kelly looked at them over the roof, took in their sagging jeans and basketball jerseys, saw the caps all worn at the same angle over the same bandana. She rifled her memory quickly and crossed her arms and cocked her hip to wait for them as they loped toward her. These three were tied up with the Trip Nines, a small-time gang from the area. She'd 'advised' a shot caller of theirs a couple years ago.

"Well, well, well," rumbled the basso tones of the lead man. She let his friends see her size him up as blatantly as he did her as they approached around the front of the car. He was over six feet tall, almost a foot taller than Kelly herself, but lanky so that he was not much wider than she. He almost certainly had a nickname like Slim, or Stretch, she guessed. His short, curly hair was clipped close into a fade around the edges of the bandana, and his skin was so dark it glistened with a nearly blue tinge in the wash of light from the sign above. "You got some nice wheels lady, and I don't mind me a skinny ass bitch now and then."

Kelly smiled thinly as she endured the laughter and the slap of palm against palm when Slim got encouragement from his friends. He looked back to her, wiping his long fingers under his nose as if recovering from a fit of laughter. "I don't know, Slim," Kelly countered, still smiling. "I think I might break you. You'd probably need some help from your friends to satisfy me."

"Oh snap!" said the shorter of the two backups, his skin the creamy caramel of mixed parentage. "Bitch be *randy!*"

"You best not be playing, girl," said Slim. "Charlie don't like him no teases."

The middling friend gave what would have been a

threatening leer to nearly anyone but Kelly, who had seen the leers of fanged creatures hundreds of years undead. Kelly met it and cocked her head to the side to give the man a sizing up. He was clearly the muscle, broad of shoulder as he was and thick-fingered. She saw prison tats on his hands. She met his eye again and considered letting him glimpse the nature of what it was he threatened.

“I don’t play, Slim,” Kelly replied as her gaze slid back to the ringleader. “But I also don’t see anything that floats my boat. That doesn’t mean we can’t all walk away a little happier tonight.”

Slim sidled closer with Shorty and Charlie following suit. Shorty leaned forward as if to rest his hand on the hood of the car. Kelly drilled him in place with the icy glare she turned on him, her smile gone in a glimmer of an instant. “Don’t do that,” she said flatly, every syllable dripping with cold calm. Even Slim stopped, and Charlie’s leer lost several degrees of breadth. Once she was sure Shorty wouldn’t touch her car, she let her gaze drift back to Slim’s and pulled the corners of her lips back in a small smile. He licked his lips like maybe he thought she was baring her teeth, instead.

“How’s B-Dup? Staying out of trouble, I presume?” Slim blinked and took half a step away. “I helped him out of a jam a while ago,” she added with a dismissive wave of one hand before returning it to the cross. “Maybe you can help me out, actually,” Kelly suggested, as if having just stumbled upon the idea. Charlie and Shorty looked to Slim for guidance, but Slim seemed to still be spinning his wheels on how this woman in the quarter-million-dollar car knew the name of a gang lieutenant. Finally, the light of cunning entered his eyes.

“What kinda help?” he wanted to know, and Kelly softened

her smile.

“You three seen anything strange around here lately? Last night or earlier tonight? Anyone that doesn’t belong around here?” She lifted her chin to indicate the street around.

“Man, fuck this bitch, man,” said Shorty, apparently having recovered his spine from his brush with Kelly’s nature. “She’s probably a cop.”

“What kind of fuckin’ cop drives wheels like *this*?” Slim derided over his shoulder. “Fuck, you dumber’n shit, Cliff. Fuckin’ loser.” Slim looked back. “What if I do know something? What’s in it for me?” He cut his eyes to the car, a gesture Kelly didn’t miss but also didn’t acknowledge. Instead, she reached for her purse, and pulled out a sheaf of twenty-dollar bills ten deep. She offered it at the end of her fingers, but though the greed was clear in his eyes, he seemed hesitant to take the cash from her directly. As if he feared it might suddenly spring a trap and drag him to his death. Kelly’s eyes half-lidded unconsciously as she quietly thrilled at the thought. Finally, he snatched for the money, but Kelly flicked it out of reach at the last moment, almost faster than his eye could follow.

“I don’t pay for nothing, and we’ve already agreed I don’t want the rest of what you’re selling,” Kelly said dryly.

“Yeah, yeah,” Slim groused, and let his hand drop. “Alright so we saw a guy fuckin’ up a dog back behind the Palace earlier. Chased him off. Wasn’t nobody’s dog from the block, though. Just some stray came through. Honestly? I thought it was the fuckin’ chef at the Palace who’s always promising the pork ain’t cat.”

“What was he doing to this dog?” Kelly inquired.

“Man, fuckin’ I don’t know,” protested Slim. “It was fuckin’ sick, aight? Fuckin’ weirdo was, like, tearing it to pieces and

shit. Biting it or some shit. There, now gimme the money, bitch,” he finished, and Kelly let him twist for a moment in the fear that she wouldn’t before she extended the cash again. He snatched for it warily and this time she let him take it. “Fuckin’ crazy bitch,” Slim muttered, and the three of them slunk back to their stoop to glower at the car.

Kelly turned to the alley beside the building, reasonably assured about the safety of her car in her absence, and headed into the narrow lane that stank of rotting fish and beef. She stepped over the small bundle of trash bags tossed into a pile from the side door of the restaurant and was careful to avoid the questionable gleam of puddles from whatever was leaking out of them. Even in the miasma, she could smell the blood from the back of the building before she reached the corner, thin and watery as it seemed. She turned the corner and for the second time in as many nights was treated to an abstract work of art that served as a memory of violence.

The alley behind the building was covered in blood, thin to her nose and marked as such as animal blood. It flowed in narrow runnels toward the center of the alley, and on the back wall of the restraint some effort had been made to splash buckets of water on the mess to rinse it off. The brick, though, would be stained for decades at least, Kelly thought. She stepped lightly around the tributaries feeding the drain in the alley, and turned slowly in the center of what would have been the carnage.

This was not the same as the night before. This was, somehow, more savage. This was chaos and violence, not finely honed and directed hatred like it had been against the couple. Why the dog, she wondered as she turned a second circle. She spotted the tracks and signs of the dumpster having been rolled down the wall after the blood

had been spilled, and saw the glisten of its wetted front side where it, too, seemed to have received treatment by the buckets. She carefully stepped over to the stinking bulk and touched her fingertips to the corner.

She felt panic bloom red and demanding, and the need to protect herself. She had been discovered, something was chewing on her. She had to destroy it, save herself. She had to... Kelly pulled back from the dumpster. So, he was disturbed by the dog. Sleeping as he did in public spaces, his reaction to being woken was a dangerous one. Kelly turned her back on the dumpster and was drawn up short by the trill of her phone. She fished it out of her pocket as she circled around the alleys, keen eyes following the signs of flight from the gang bangers. “Kelly Patterson,” she answered distractedly.

“Kelly, it’s Wilkes,” said the awkwardly-obsequious voice on the other end of the line.

“Lovely to hear from you, Wilkes,” Kelly replied and came to a halt rather than divide her attention. “I hope you weren’t too overworked today?”

“Ah, yeah, well, a bit, but that’s okay. It’s important, right? I mean it was important to you that I take care of that.”

“It was,” she agreed.

“That’s kind of why I’m calling, though. There’s kind of a problem.”

“Go on,” Kelly invited when the lieutenant hesitated.

“There’s a connection between the victims,” Wilkes admitted in a low voice, as if concerned that those near him might overhear. “We found out they’d both adopted from the same agency, about two years ago. Some place called the Dream Maker Foundation for Families. I’ve kept it quiet for now,” he assured her. “But I can’t just bury this lead. After the papers today, too many people are looking at this

investigation. The best I can do is give you a head start on it.”

“I understand, Wilkes,” Kelly soothed, and did. “Thanks for the warning. How long have I got?”

“Twelve hours,” he answered. “Maybe twenty-four? It may not end up in the papers. We’re burying the kid lead on our end, but you never know.”

Kelly thanked him and signed off and resumed her slinking progress along the fading trail of moist debris that ultimately ended at the mouth of an alley. She found herself led into the street between a shuttered porn shop and the barred, misted glass of a liquor store. She stepped into the street and ignored the questioning stares as the petite, suited blonde emerged from the shadows and filth apparently untouched by either. A steady stream of people moved through here, and most were content to merely glance curiously at her before resuming their intense study of nothing in particular. Around here it didn’t pay to notice things, for most people.

Kelly dialed Myabb as she stood, an island of stillness in a sluggish river of motion. He picked up after three rings. “Speak,” he half invited, half commanded.

“Looks like you’re going to be able to help out a little after all, Jonas,” Kelly spoke, a touch pleased to be able to answer such a demand with orders. “Look up what you can on Dream Maker Foundation for Families, and let me know what you come up with, will you?”

“Alright,” he agreed. “On it. You want me to copy Gory on it, too?” Kelly said he might as well, and they signed off. Her phone went back into her pocket and she turned to delve back into the short series of turns that would take her to the car. She gave the sullen trio a bright smile and wave as

she sat down into the muscle car, and then slipped away from the curb.

August 2, 1999. 10:08 PM.

Kelly called in to her message farm and paged through the mundanities until she came to Scut's most recent message. "I'm, uh," he stammered into the scratchy connection, and Kelly could hear the cars coursing past in the background of the payphone's white noise. "I'm sorry, Kelly. But I think I lost that guy I saw. I don't even know if it was a guy, though, you know? I mean a guy I should have been following. It was probably, uh, nothing. Anyways, wanted to let you know." Kelly listened to the message again, just to confirm she was hearing the tone of the salesman she thought she heard the first time. Scut didn't believe it was nothing, but he desperately wanted her to. She turned the car toward the bus bench she often found him at.

The twitchy caitiff rose from the bench as the low, sleek car approached. Kelly watched him through the windshield as he glanced over his shoulder as if considering an escape route, and pulled up at the curb. Scut approached the passenger side door and seemed to wait for the window to roll down. When it didn't, he heaved a sigh and reached to open the door. His sleeveless denim jacket reeked of pot as he sat into the car and closed them in together. Kelly pulled away from the curb as he was saying, "Hey, Seneschal. I'm glad you swung by. I'm sorry about making a fuss about nothing. I just get, you know, hunches sometimes. Usually turns out to be nothing."

Kelly didn't answer him. She didn't look at him. She waited for his own conscience to eat away at him, his paranoia to spur him. She waited for his fear to erode his pride. It took two blocks. "Okay, look. I lost him, okay? It wasn't my fault,

though. He cut southeast and started into Downtown. You *know* I'm supposed to stay out of Downtown. Lucina wouldn't even blink if some..." He caught himself before he said what he thought. Kelly didn't answer that, either. "Some kindred took me out just for standing on the street corner. You *know* she wouldn't."

"I do," Kelly admitted with icy calm. Scut swallowed as if he were a mortal, the sound gulping dryly in his throat. She was frustrated by the end of the trail, and for the Byzantine and lethal social rules that barred the caitiff from being seen too near to the elders and their closest allies. She did, however, understand his reluctance. "You did fine," she forced herself to say. "Show me where you lost him," she instructed, and the car took her direction in turn.

Kelly stepped onto the sidewalk, Scut hustling out and around the hot nose of the car to join her. She looked up and down the empty street. This close to the wealth and power of Downtown Milwaukee, the Rack was quiet and bereft of the neon-coated vice that marked the heart of the district. Here were nicer examples of lower class apartments and tenements, neighborhood grocers with barred windows but no alarm, and gas stations that closed after dark rather than risk the lives of the clerks that worked them by relying on a pane of bulletproof glass.

Had the kindred come here because it was quiet? Was it an unobserved avenue between the Rack and the core where the elders kept their playground? There was too much land to watch, she thought not for the first time, and too few with the capacity to watch it effectively. Scut was well-meaning, but she doubted very much he had the ability to pierce all but the simplest of kindred cloaks. As if answering her thoughts he said, "Right there. That was the corner I lost him at."

Kelly nodded and observed the narrow alley between tenements. It was unremarkable, and though it was musty with stagnant pools of water from its depths where the sun would rarely shine, it did not stink of rot or urine or sex or blood. She stepped into the mouth and peered down its length. A mortal's eyes would not see the shape of the dozen slats of wooden fencing that bisected the alley, but hers were more than adequate. She saw, too, the streak of moist dirt, fresh enough to still be glittering faintly to her preternatural gaze. "Wait here," she instructed distractedly, and if Scut replied she didn't notice.

The walls of the building looming over her shoulders produced an odd mix of comfort and unease. She felt covered by the weight of the buildings rising several stories to either side, and closed off from the open sky above from which attack might come. At the same time, she felt the urge to pull an unnecessary breath into her lungs just to prove she still could. She had never been *very* claustrophobic, and some of Stefan's early treatment had sanded away the sharp edges of even more. But she was suddenly very aware of how few inches separated her shoulders from the walls, and how small she was compared to the tons of brick and concrete and glass rising above.

Kelly stood at the base of the fence and looked up at its edge. This close, it was impossible for her to miss the signs of someone having clambered over it recently. The boot print halfway up its length, barely smeared, was the same as had tracked through the blood in the couple's home. She could smell their blood in the muted miasma of the alley now that it was right in front of her face.

Kelly reached out her fingertips and let her eyes slip closed. The not-too-distant sounds of indulgence from the Rack behind, and slow-grinding dedication from the workaholics ahead, drifted into silence as she pulled in her focus. All of

a sudden, she needed to get away. She could *feel* Scut's eyes on her back, following her. He was getting close, closing in. Had to escape, she had to escape, there were still... The impression faded and Kelly glanced back over her shoulder to ensure Scut was still silhouetted by the streetlight at the mouth of the alley. He was, and she lowered her hand. She dug for her phone and started back toward the street.

"Got away clean, right?" Scut was asking as her thumb pressed number keys and the small liquid crystal display read them back to her. "No sign. I looked, you know?"

"Of course you did," Kelly agreed sanguinely and lifted a finger to silence him when his mouth opened again. The phone rang twice before Gordon snatched it up, sounding sleepy. "Miss Kelly?" he asked as greeting. He needed more of a social life.

"Gordon, I need your help," she said and reached for the door of the car. Scut started hesitantly around the nose for the passenger side, and with a finger she caused the door locks to *thunk* into place. He lifted a handle that didn't respond and blinked questioningly at it before he tried it again. Kelly closed her door and fitted the key into the ignition as she continued. "I need you to cross reference adoption records from Dream Maker Foundation for Families with addresses near Juneau and 6th streets out to Wisconsin Avenue and 3rd. Focus on the years 1995 to 1999."

The engine roared to life and from outside the window she heard, "I'll just...I'll head back, you know? You know where to find me!" Scut called to her as he stepped back to avoid losing toes to the back tire of the car. Kelly glided out from the curb.

"But...Miss Kelly, those records are sealed," Gordon

replied, clearly trying to force away the fog of sleep and catch up to the conversation. “You need a court order to get access.”

“A less capable and devoted investigator might need a court order,” she oozed. She could practically see the grin at her praise, and smell the obsequious flush of pheromones. “You, however, are a wonder upon whom I rely explicitly.”

“I’ll...Whatever it takes, Miss Kelly. I’ll get it for you, I promise.”

Kelly guided the car toward the sluggish, brown body of the river to the East. “There’s a good boy,” she said and disconnected the call before she was forced to face the slaving glee to have received such a sop from her that was doubtless on the way. Gory had had a couple of hours to make his calls, Jonas was presumably grumbling his way through his research, and she had traced her lead to the cliff’s edge at which her prey took flight and disappeared.

She wanted to do something, to pull on some string or push on some pressure point and shake the city until the quarry fell out, but there wasn’t anything, yet. She had to wait. She wasn’t good at waiting. Somewhere, in the shadows of the city, was the kindred and he was hunting. She wondered if he could feel her presence behind him, as she could feel his ahead.

August 7, 1999. 8:11 PM.

Several nights came and went. Kelly chafed at every tick of the clock. She wanted to move forward; she knew there were victims to find, attacks to trace. There were footsteps in the dust fading every moment and she was falling behind in the chase. She dove into her work for Lucina, and for her firm, in a vain effort to distract herself.

Wendy drew away as Kelly's temper shortened. She became like a visitor at a zoo unwilling to approach too closely to the tiger cage behind the bars of which the cat paced hungrily. Kelly saw—how could she not?—but she couldn't stop it. She had to trust to Dorst, who had perhaps a perspective to offer as a hunter who had tracked blood himself, to guide Wendy safely through. Kelly woke hating herself when she didn't find Wendy's scent or warmth in the room with her.

"Miss Wendy said she needed to visit her dad," Gordon said from the door when Kelly deigned to open her eyes. She tried to quash the flash of abandonment and jealous suspicion she felt at the news. "I've made some progress on the records," Gordon added hesitantly when he seemed to sense her mood.

"That's good, Gordon," she said blandly and rolled out of bed. She sat in the chair at the vanity and stared at her own eyes while he droned about the details of his quest. She learned about the bureaucratic bitch, and the officious ponce, and the avalanche of paperwork as he traced where the records were stored, and she forgot it almost as quickly. He nattered, she thought in irritation. That was it. Gordon nattered, and it was grating like steel wool over her raw temper. She struggled not to show him, though. It wasn't his fault, and he *was* trying to make the situation better. She was nonetheless glad when he finished and began to sweep away the night's severed locks.

Kelly was pulling a cashmere turtleneck over her head when her phone began to chirp from the bedside table. She flashed on Wendy, her own phone to her ear behind the falls of her chestnut hair, the smile the mortal wore when Wendy didn't think Kelly could see her thinking about her. She jogged across the room and grabbed for the phone.

Wendy couldn't be here, but she knew Kelly would be awake now and wanted to talk to her, Kelly was suddenly sure. She connected the call and lifted it, "Wendy? I'm glad you called..."

"I've been called a lot of things," Jonas interrupted dryly. "Wendy is not one of them, but I can't say I mind, either."

Kelly's embarrassment burned hot and red and dragged her fangs to full extension, but she smothered it. "Oh, it's you," she grated. "Sorry, I was expecting a call." The lie didn't rankle, but the fact that she had to lie did. They saw each other so rarely; why would Wendy take even those few minutes at the beginning of the night away? "Do you have something?"

"Caught you before breakfast, did I?" Jonas sniped. "Good, because I've been tearing my hair out the last two nights trying to track down this adoption agency."

"It grows back," Kelly replied and pressed the phone to her shoulder as she sat on the edge of the bed to pull on her jeans. "Those agencies are heavily regulated, it shouldn't be too hard to follow the money."

"You'd think that, wouldn't you?" Jonas answered. "Not this place. I *did* find they have three locations, or had three. Agency closed down six months ago, all three places. Declared Chapter Eleven. Poof, gone. They were set up in Madison, Chicago, and Milwaukee. Registered originally and licensed out of the Chicago clinic. Apparently, they took a while to get set up. Licenses and such were issued three years before the doors opened, and the places didn't stick around much longer than that."

"That doesn't sound like a front at all." Kelly dripped sarcasm into the ether between them. Jonas snorted. "Where'd the capital come from? Client lists have to be pretty short if they were just funneling money or

something.”

“That’s just one of the weird things about these clinics,” Jonas said. “They were very well-thought of. Dozens of satisfied customers more than happy to share success stories, and I’ve heard more sappy shit in the last two evenings than I thought I could stomach. Everyone was really surprised and disappointed to hear the clinics were gone. A couple of them were going to recommend them to friends who were looking to adopt.”

Kelly scowled at nothing in particular as she stood stock still in her room. A front didn’t usually want to appear so successful. Successful enough to deflect attention, not so successful as to draw it. It was something of a tightrope. Was that the reason for the short lifespan? Too popular? It didn’t seem like it would be particularly difficult to put off potential clients, though, if the influx was starting to get too dense. Weird, indeed.

“Who was the doctor that ran the clinic here in town?” she asked. Perhaps there was a scent to pick up there.

“Weird thing number two, but this one I think I can explain, at least,” Jonas said smugly. “No one could quite remember his name, or properly describe him. All they remembered was a good bedside manner and a gentle voice. One of them described it as hypnotic. I’m thinking someone dipped in to tinker.”

Shit, Kelly thought. A low tingle of apprehension seemed to pass up the back of her forearms. If Jonas hadn’t been the local to manage the tinkering a few years ago, and she was sure she’d have detected him trying to cover that up by now, then an operation on this scale could only have fallen to a few. Elders, all, and some of them dead or as good as. She reminded herself that her authority under the Mask

was more than enough to swim those waters if that's where this blood trail led.

"Makes sense, Jonas. What about the capital?"

"Couple of shells fed by some transfers out of the Caymans put up and taken down for the purpose. It led nowhere fast, but it wasn't much different than any other front. On the other hand..." he trailed off, suggestively.

"Out with it, Jonas," Kelly demanded. She hated having these conversations on the phone; it was impossible to get a proper threat across with only the voice, particularly when dealing with kindred well aware of their own power.

"Tell me you dragged me into this Mask business because you were worried about me taking up the reins now that Gracis is out," he demanded wryly. Kelly seethed in silence for a moment and he added, "It's not *all* about just trying to put together a girl band with Lucina's backing of Belfort."

How vicious did she want to be, she wondered briefly. Her first instinct was 'very,' but she quashed it. Jonas *had* proven useful and deft, and though he was well wide of the mark the kindreds' egos were always a fragile thing. Sometimes coddling them, even with obvious falsehoods, was the path of least resistance. She gritted her teeth and forced herself to smile so that the sound of it was in her voice as she answered, "You got me, Myabb. I didn't want you sitting on the Council because I feared your influence there would weaken Lucina's position. She just took my advice on it."

"I knew it," he oozed, tone thick with vindication. If he'd been in front of her that tone alone would have earned him a slap. Maybe phone conversations had their benefits. "Right, well, I used a little of that sly intelligence that had you so worried, so be glad I have it. A place like that needs

equipment. Diagnostics, beds, office furniture, computers. Stuff.”

“It does,” Kelly agreed. “I hope all this foreplay is going somewhere.”

“Never been much of a Casanova,” Jonas shot back lightly. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that,” he hastened to add. Well, at least he knew how far to push, sometimes, she consoled herself. “Anyways, all that stuff has to come from somewhere. Turns out they got it from auction, from *another* adoption agency’s gear that went up for auction after the place went under and the banks foreclosed. A ton of debt, despite dozens of satisfied customers in Madison, Chicago, and Milwaukee. Quite a grab for Dream Maker Foundation for Families, it seems. Pennies on the dollar for all the equipment they left behind when they shuttered their doors. I hear the banks are already testing the waters with auction houses to recoup some of their losses.”

It was smart, Kelly had to admit. A less thorough investigator would probably have missed the trail. *She* would have missed the trail. “Well done, Jonas,” she offered, and was pretty sure she controlled the begrudging tone. If not, he didn’t seem to mind it.

“I know, Kelly. I know. If you aren’t careful, I’ll be leading this little coterie of ours before too long. Wouldn’t that be a feather in my cap, to have snagged control of the Mask from the Seneschal herself? Scandalous.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Jonas,” Kelly cautioned. She was already headed for the office as she did. If the banks were working on liquidating the equipment, there would be an auction coming up. More waiting, perhaps, and another chance for the kindred to strike, but with luck a lead to the reason he was on his rampage and therefore the

means to bring it to an end. “You did good work, but you didn’t bring him down yet, let alone single-handed.”

“Not yet,” Jonas agreed. “Not yet. But I can’t let you be the only one with a solo blood hunt under your belt.”

“Whatever gets you through the night, Jonas. Stay on it and stay sharp, he isn’t reusing havens that I can find. Let me know if you hear anything else.”

“Whatever you say, Boss. For now.”

Kelly disconnected the call and reached to power on her computer. As the drives whirred and the text scrolled faster than the mortal eye could follow, she felt at last like she was moving in a direction she wanted to be moving. She felt like she was drawn to the kindred out in the city, or perhaps he to her. As if the echoes of him she had drunk had made them the opposing poles of a magnet, drawn together inexorably over vast distances. She inched closer as she compiled a list of auction houses in the city, and instructions for the boys to pursue during the daylight hours to find where the Dream Maker lot would be featured. Kelly even managed, for an hour at least, to forget that Wendy had not been there to greet her awareness this evening.

The noted instructions went onto the island in the kitchen where they would find them in the morning, but Kelly didn’t linger in the space. It reminded her of dancing around the splatter of tomato sauce and the sizzle of grease as she played at chef for Wendy while swathed in the priceless silk of evening gowns. She could practically hear the echo of Wendy’s delighted laughter at the twirling silliness, and she hesitated on the edge of going back to the counter at the island and delving for the traces of residue that might linger still. If she really did enjoy the displays. If the tittering laughter wasn’t just the act of a woman terrified

to tempt the monster trying to cater to her. She sighed and left the dark room, rather than brave knowing one way or the other.

August 7, 1999. 11:57 PM.

She paced the halls. Gory hadn't checked in yet, but the Anubi were notoriously hard to track down. She could call him, push there, try to motivate him, but he didn't need that. She risked him digging in his heels and reacting to her crack of the whip by taking the bit in his teeth. She tossed the idea aside. She could call Wilkes, have him double check 911 calls and missing persons reports again, double check the work she knew he was already doing in case he had missed something. He would do it, and without complaint, but when he found nothing he would be crushed to disappoint her. He was capable enough to trust on his first pass, and setting him up to disappoint her was cruelty for its own sake. She could get in her car and trawl the Rack, trusting that tingle of instinct that sometimes seemed to guide her when her physical senses failed or were inadequate, or even just catch a glimpse of him slinking behind the curtains of neon. She thought of her surety that Wendy had been calling, and discarded the idea at once. She didn't deal in hunches, and she had proved tonight how little they were to be trusted.

Kelly had coursed the long, night-cloaked hallways of the house a few dozen times, and taken enough steps that a mortal's feet would be sore with the impacts, when the rattle of the gate at the end of the long drive drew her up short. She cut a glance at her watch and saw the hands indicating it was only a few minutes shy of midnight. She scowled at the door and took the stairs two at a time to peek

past the curtains beside the door's frame. Wendy's headlights wove up from the gate as it rattled closed behind. Kelly watched it course up to the roundabout and scowled again at the slanted stop it came to. Wendy clambered out, dropped her keys, staggered a step as she bent to collect them, and apparently straightened too quickly as she reached out to steady herself on the roof of the car.

"Hey Kelly!" Wendy enthused as Kelly came through the tall double doors that lead into the house. "I thought you'd be out by now."

"You're drunk, Wendy," Kelly said, and felt her brows drawing together in consternation even as she moved to steady the mortal. And to draw close enough to test Wendy's scent for only those shades she expected to find. "What are you thinking, driving drunk?"

Wendy waved her hand in a sloppy arc. "Daddy's only a couple of blocks away, remember? Remember you bought the house so you'd be close?"

Kelly ducked the arc and slipped in to put her cold arm around Wendy's waist to take some of Wendy's weight on her hip and against her ribs. Wendy leaned on her heavily enough that she had to step to the side to catch the shift of the larger woman's frame. She draped herself on Kelly's shoulders and her whiskey-rich breath was hot against Kelly's neck. "It's okay," Wendy breathed. "My secret knows the Mayor. But shhhhh," Kelly turned aside from the rush of breath sour in her sharp senses. "It's a girlfriend."

Kelly tried for a smile as Wendy giggled, "I got that backwards." Her lips found Kelly's throat and neck, and her fingers tugged indelicately at the high collar of Kelly's turtleneck. "I want to get you backwards," she slurred in some approximation of lustiness.

“Wendy...” Kelly demurred, and gently pushed the mortal’s hands away. “I was worried. You’re out late, you drove drunk...”

Kelly almost staggered as Wendy pulled away abruptly, and then half-lunged to catch the mortal when she overbalanced in the other direction. “Fine,” Wendy spat. “I didn’t know I had a curfew but you’re right. I could have wrecked your car, or your gate. I should have treated your things more respectfully.”

“That’s not what I was worried about, Wendy,” Kelly shot back, instinctively jumping on the defensive and baring verbal if not yet literal fangs. “I was worried about *you*.”

“Right, your most prized possession.” Kelly was struck still, and Wendy staggered on a couple steps ahead. Kelly jogged a step to catch up in time to steady the mortal with a hand on the elbow.

“That’s not how I...” Kelly started, and cut off. Caught off guard, she couldn’t finish the lie in a way she thought would convince Wendy, even drunk. “I didn’t mean to make you feel like that,” she diverted.

“Yes, it is,” Wendy countered as she kicked her shoes off to arc wildly into the vaulted foyer of the house, narrowly missing the large, round table with its bowl of petunias with the left. Kelly reached back to close the front door and Wendy took the opportunity to twist away. Kelly’s hand shot out to catch hold of the elbow again, thinking the mortal was about to spill, but as the door closed harder than intended she saw Wendy pirouetting almost deftly toward the table. “You have all these pretty things, and you keep collecting more of them. Your paintings and your albums and your cars and your people. You know I’m just one more of them.”

Kelly's tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. Wendy wasn't entirely wrong, but with her it was so much more. How could Kelly explain? The thirst she had been born again with was not the only demand of her dark blood. Could she face herself in Wendy's eyes if she explained that she needed to be wanted by Wendy? She heard Stefan's voice in her mind, an echo filled with smug superiority. *You know you want me. Admit it.* What if she were to tell the mortal that if she were to want leave Kelly, Kelly couldn't promise she would or could allow it. "Don't, Wendy," she said instead as she finally found her voice. "It's not like that, it really isn't."

The table legs grated in an echoing squeal as Wendy's hip collided with it. The bowl slid across the surface of the table on the edge of falling. "Oops," Wendy giggled as she leaned into the mahogany. She sobered and warned Kelly off with her eyes as she straightened herself with the help of the table. Kelly drew up short, having only closed half the distance between them. The distance Kelly felt between them kept getting wider, though. "I'm just surprised you didn't send someone out to follow me tonight. They could have been bored to tears watching me drink and talk to Daddy."

Kelly opened her mouth to defend herself, but Wendy went on as if she didn't see it. "Daddy says hi. He wanted me to say hi to Dorst and Gordon, too, but I said they'd probably be asleep when I got home. I guess they've been spending a lot of time with him lately."

Kelly winced. "I thought he could use some friends..." she began, but Wendy laughed. It was a laugh that chilled Kelly to her bones.

"No, you didn't," Wendy said. "You sicced them on him *right* after I told you I was worried he'd be lonely if I moved

in. Did you tell them not to tell me, Kelly? Was that one of the things I'm not allowed to know? How you were involving my *father* in your little webs?"

"What did it hurt?" Kelly shot back, and wished she had the words back the moment she heard their echo in the wide chamber. Wendy draw back as if in disbelief.

"What did it hurt? What if he finds out they only spend time with him because they've been ordered to be nice to him? Did you even consider that, or did you just think about how best you could add me to your collection of things?" Wendy's eyes glittered with a rime of angry tears under her fierce scowl. Kelly wished the power in her blood didn't allow her to see the swirling, bruise-purple colors of hurt and anger wrapped around her love.

"It's not like that, Wendy. I wouldn't..." Kelly trailed off, and when Wendy demanded to know what it *was* like, she tried again. "They don't just spend time with him because I told them to. They like him, genuinely, and would have done the same if they were free to. I can tell the difference in that kind of thing."

"Can they?" Wendy asked abruptly and Kelly flinched as if slapped. "Can I?"

"Wendy!" Kelly recovered, and reached a hand toward the mortal that Wendy stepped back from. "I wouldn't do that to you." Her words rang hollow in her ears. She had done it, or at least started to. The first drink was such a light thread, but it was a thread that tied the mortal to her. That stole a piece of her freewill. Worse, she had considered another drink given in secret. She had even considered the Embrace, just to guarantee that Wendy wouldn't be able to simply leave Kelly's side.

Kelly's phone rang, and she dug it from her pocket. Her

arm was cocked back to hurl it across the room as she looked up and saw Wendy making her careful way up the stairs. "I'm going to bed, Kelly. I'm sorry. I know this is your lunch break or whatever. Oh wait, no it isn't. You didn't have someone in our bed with you."

"Wendy," Kelly pleaded at the retreating back. Wendy turned, wavered on the steps, and arched a brow down at Kelly from above. Kelly felt very small under that gaze, a serf prostrated before a monarch. Her phone chirped again and she growled. Wendy turned and finished the climb.

"Save the world, Kelly. It's what you do, right?"

Kelly squeezed her eyes closed and felt her fangs grating against her lower arc of teeth as she struggled to control her voice. She wanted to weep and beg at Wendy's feet even as she wanted to scream and thrash and tear every bit of the house to pieces if that was what it took to show the mortal it was nothing. Nothing beside her need to have Wendy. To possess her. "What is it?" she barked into the phone.

"Hey, Miss Patterson, it's Jimmy O'Deel." Kelly felt very tired, despite the fact that dawn was several hours off. But Jimmy and his partner Alex had been good to her, and so she tried to quash it. "Lieutenant Wilkes told me I should call you if I came across a call like this, and I think I'm pretty good with that. I don't know how you'd be mixed up in anything like this, and frankly I don't want to. I like those doughnut deliveries you drop by now and then, you know? But you probably want to swing by 1088 Water street in the next few minutes, if you can."

Kelly looked up the stairs. She could hear Wendy crying into the pillow from where she stood, still by the front door. The way the mortal was trying to muffle the sound, she didn't want Kelly to know and wouldn't thank her for interrupting. It wasn't her fault that Kelly's hearing was so

sharp. "I'll be there, Jimmy. Hang tight."

August 8, 1999. 12:29 AM.

She couldn't scream her frustration and hurt at the night, but her car could, and she let it. Kelly blew past a speed trap doing a hundred and thirty. She was out of sight before the lights even fully blared into the street behind her. She slowed as she hit Water street and pulled up behind the cruiser at the curb. This one's lights were not flashing, but as she stepped into the street she could hear the crackle of the radio from within sending out its repetition of the BOLO for her car. "All units, be on the lookout for a black sports car speeding West near Water Street," the bored-sounding dispatcher repeated. She almost managed to feel guilt for the poor SOBs that would end up pulled over and ticketed by the frustrated cops she'd left in her dust.

Alex, with his high school jock build and baby face and uniform blues, stood in the alcove of the house's door. He glanced past her to the car, glanced at his watch, and reached for the radio on his shoulder. "This is car 92 calling it, we got 'im. Just some guy with more money than brains. You can call off the BOLO." Kelly stepped up and offered her hand along with a tight smile.

"Thanks," she said. He nodded and shook her hand, now long-used to the chill of her touch and accepting of her simple explanation of 'circulation problems.' It wasn't even untrue, as far as it went. "What's going on?"

"Fuck if I know," he said with a shake of his head as he retrieved his hand. "Jimmy's inside. I took one look around, heard the story, and decided I wanted to be out here. Call's cleared, so no one else is on the way."

“I’ll have to bring some doughnuts by soon,” Kelly answered. Shaken by what was inside or not, he brightened at the idea of another box delivery. Less, she was sure, for the pastries than the envelopes that she included with them. “Thanks, Alex. Why don’t you go warm up the car? Jimmy’ll be out soon, I suspect.” For a moment, Alex looked on the verge of asking her what she intended, then seemed to decide better and headed for the cruiser at the curb with a nod. Kelly carried on past him and in through what used to be the front door.

Kelly’s sharp senses read the spoor at the door on the way through. Heavy, solid core hardwood, double dead bolt, chain lock, barely a mark where it lay off its hinges against the wall in the front hall. The splintered frame told her they’d spent more on the door than the seat in which it sat, which was their bad luck. From ahead, a few rooms up the narrow hall, she could hear voices. A woman in tears, a man with a voice filled with forced confidence but possessed of a tremble in its heart. Kelly could not miss the prey-like fear, even if the woman it was intended to soothe would never hear it. Jimmy’s voice, assuring them that a detective would be along soon, that it was all over. She dug the forged IAD badge from her jacket and had it ready as she stepped into the sitting room looking out over the small yard.

Jimmy with his ginger beard and lean build looked grateful for her arrival. He folded closed his moleskin and tucked it away. “Mister and Missus Howard, this is...” he began, and Kelly cut him off as she pulled a professionally-regretful smile onto her lips that showed just a bit of tooth.

“Detective Carol Fields, IAD,” she said, and showed them the badge. Jimmy blinked and his back straightened until she cut him a warning glance. He relaxed, a bit, but he still looked skeptically at the badge Mister Howard was studying as if he knew what he was looking at.

Mister Howard finally nodded, but then the sobbing woman looked up and cried, “Internal Affairs? *This was a cop!?*”

“No, no,” Kelly soothed and tucked her badge back into the pocket of the windbreaker she’d grabbed on the way out of the house. She tapped the power of her blood and enfolded all three of the mortals in the lulling awe of her Presence. “No, I’m just the only one they had available and I volunteered. I’ll make sure my full notes get passed along to the detective who will be looking into this, just as soon as dayshift starts.”

Mister Howard had some questions, Kelly could see them trying to bubble up through the urge to trust, to believe. Whether because of the stress of the situation, or the distraction of his wife’s sobbing nod, the questions were subsumed. “You folks going to be okay for just a minute if I walk officer O’Deel to the curb, just to get caught up on his notes? You’ll be okay,” she answered her own question before they had a chance to, and pressed a little harder on the Presence so that they did believe, and trust, and were calmed. At least for a moment. With a hand on Jimmy’s elbow, she led him from the room toward the front door.

“IAD, huh? That was a pretty nice badge. Where’d you get it” he asked in a whisper as soon as they were out of easy earshot. Out of her sight, Missus Howard started crying again, and Kelly could hear the whispered nothings that Mister used to try to soothe her.

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want answers to, Jimmy. Alex has already earned you guys some doughnuts next week, do you want to go and ruin that?”

“You know I don’t,” he answered, but she could hear the reluctance in his voice. He didn’t mind taking a few grand

a year to roust a pimp or two, or to put a scare into a cokehead politician, but Kelly masquerading as a cop was a different matter. Or maybe it was the forged badge; it *was* exceptionally good, and for seventy-five thousand it had better be. “Alright so, here’s what happened...”

By the time she was gently closing the passenger door of the cruiser and watching it disappear down the street, Jimmy had laid out the situation. Mister and Missus had been heading to bed after their evening news binge, when a big, dark guy in a long coat that looked like it was covered in dried mud (*blood*) had kicked through the front door. ‘Easy as you please’ was how Jimmy had said it had been described. Kelly could imagine the surprise at that. He, the intruder, had cornered them in the back room. He’d ranted at them, screamed, threatened. Jimmy had quoted, “Where are they? Where is she? Why are you here? Tell me or I’ll fucking kill you.” Then he’d mentioned the fangs with a joke about costumed supervillains and Kelly’s heart had gone colder even than her corpse chill.

Kelly turned back into the house and pulled her moleskin just for appearance’s sake. She had as much as she needed, for the most part. Not all she wanted, but that was what the act was for. The weeping and soothing greeted her return, and she pulled on the corners of her lips for that professional condolence look again. “Sorry about that, Mister and Missus Howard. Just had to make sure I didn’t have you going over the same ground too many times.”

Missus cried, and Mister looked like he’d remembered his questions until Kelly had returned, then they had all gone out of his head again. “So, what can you tell me about the man who attacked you?” she began, and by the end of the twenty-minute questioning was glad she’d had much cause to practice her acting in the last year. She also had confirmed Jimmy’s recounting, and gotten something

approximating a physical description of her quarry. It was as if knowing what he looked like strengthened the sense of him out there, somewhere, in the city. She found herself casting occasional glances over her shoulder as if expecting to see him standing within reach.

“Sounds like someone got an early start on Halloween,” she joked to them when the topic of fangs came up. Missus had calmed by now enough to smile wanly at the thin joke, and Mister did the same with a pat on his wife’s hand. Kelly’s power may not last longer than she was in the room, but the calm would. She didn’t mind the small extra effort to assure Missus; few enough were the times when someone would have done as much for Kelly, and she knew what it was to want it.

“Alright, Mister and Missus Howard, I’d recommend you get a room for the night, maybe the week. Give us time to look into this. I’m sure you’re perfectly safe, but a guy crazy enough to do this in the first place is better to not take chances on, right? Let me give you the card for a good law firm, just in case, okay?” She slipped them the impersonal cards for Patterson and Associates she kept a small cache of. They took it, and she waited for them to pack an overnight bag and get in their sedan to drive way. Mister scowled at the sleek black Viper on the curb, glanced over at Kelly with questions in his eyes, but when she lifted her hand in a wave he returned the gesture and then drove away. Kelly felt the smile melt from her lips the moment they were around the corner. She turned back to the house and considered the story she had heard.

You weren’t here for them, she said to the kindred. She could almost see him standing at her side as she stared in through the broken door. *No*, he answered with fangs in his voice. She heard it as she had heard it described; high,

thin, almost whining even as it screamed and railed. *Were you expecting another couple from the agency? You know I was. Does that mean you're working from old information?* The color began to fade from the image of the kindred at her shoulder and she studied the boot print on the door.

She could smell a faint, chemical tang of some kind of -cide. She lifted her nose and followed the faint, summer breeze to the flower bed beside the door. She saw the depression of the boot print peeking out from behind a screen of shrubby leaves, and she followed it to the next, and the next, until she saw the print on the window sill. She stepped forward to touch the sill with the tips of her fingers as she drew in her focus. Her eyes slipped closed and then she could get inside, quietly, so the girl wouldn't have to watch. She wouldn't understand, that it was so good that they were hurting, bleeding. She would cry and cry, but they had to pay...Kelly looked up at the kindred hanging from the second-floor window, pulled up like a chin up to peer inside.

So, you went back to take out the parents, before, she said to him. *I did,* he answered from above. *Then where's Danny, or the child from the other house?* Kelly realized she didn't even know the second child's name. The papers hadn't had it; they hadn't put together the missing kids yet, and the cops were holding that back to verify tips and confessions. The kindred's ghost faded out of view and she turned back to the front hall ahead, and bent at the door. This time she hesitated, her fingers hovering over the place where foot had met door had shattered doorframe. She could practically feel the psychic energy arcing in tiny bolts to tingle on her fingertips. She touched and hated. She was denied, deceived. She would destroy, they would pay because the others could not. And the girl. The girl was not here. Where was the girl? They had to tell her, she would

kill one and then the other would...

Kelly shivered out of the skin of the kindred and he continued on ahead, vivid and lifelike if moving through molasses in his frenzied rush ahead her measured advance. Ahead she could sense movement, tension, and fear. Prey things. She knew prey things, and so did the kindred. She heard prey sounds, and saw prey flight, and felt prey thirst. They ran, and so did he. She walked, followed the faint traces of -cide and dirt that mortals would miss until they brought in their machines and lights and chemicals, and with them tracked the weaving sprint of the kindred down the hall. She glanced up and saw the hairline fracture in the drywall at shoulder height. The place where he planted his weight to push and chase around the corner. She put her hand on top of it and closed her eyes.

Why did everything bad always happen to her? It wasn't fair. It hadn't been *fair* since her sister had been born. That had been the first bad... Kelly pulled her hand away with a hiss. It didn't help, she still felt the self-pitying grease, the narcissistic whinging, sliding along the back of her neck where it leaked out of her mind. She made a face of disgust and wiped her hand on the thigh of her jeans, though what coated it was not physical and not shaken free so easily. She caught herself wishing the kindred *had* killed the Missus, so that her psychic waste could not have contaminated this place. The image of him ahead, wild hair under the mud-*(blood)*stained cap jutting out all around the chin, right arm pulled in close to the abdomen, as if against pain, even as he railed, faded anew. The presence of the kindred faded away, drifted back to its nebulous elsewhere.

The weeping mortal had cast off her misery like rounds from a munitions dump on fire. Everything would be more of her in here, now, and the room where the confrontation

had been, where he had paced and thrown things and *touched* was where she had sat. Kelly made a disgusted sound in her throat and dug her phone from her pocket and dialed Dorst. Seven rings later his sleep-thick voice answered and gave her a moment of pause. She only realized after she didn't hear it that she had expected to hear the high, reedy tones of the kindred. "Myes?" he drawled.

"It's Kelly. Get dressed. I need you to sit on a house overnight, just make sure no one breaks in. Owners should be back tomorrow. Give them a wave and drive away, just so they know it was babysat."

"Right away, Kelly," Dorst hastened to assure. "Will you be there?"

"No," she answered, and gave the address briefly before disconnecting the call. She didn't want to deal with his disappointment at her absence. It was enough for her to know it was there, she didn't feel the need to confront it directly tonight.

Kelly struggled the heavy door up to lean against the frame in some approximation of closure. Her car took her out of the neighborhood at a relatively sedate sixty and then she was headed for her office across downtown. She could try to summon the kindred to her. She was, a bit, surprised she had not already done so by accident. As she had with Stefan. Thoughts of her sire swirled hot and agonizing through her mind, but she doused them in the hunt for her prey. Stefan would wait; he always did.

The kindred was working on outdated information, she had decided, and nothing she had considered since changed that opinion. But where had he gotten it from? And why the blitz attacks, the near-frenzy of violence on the parents? He was capable of entering and absconding with a

child barely old enough to be potty-trained. Why not simply slit the throats? Because, she knew, he wanted them to hurt as they died. He wanted them to see and touch and taste the pain he felt, because they had inflicted it on him. She knew, because it's what she would have—had—done.

What she stuck on was the public nature of the violence. He *seemed* on the edge of loss of control, and yet he executed his plans with precision. He ranted wildly at the Howards, threatened and was fully willing to kill them, but left without leaving so much as a scratch on them. He could, if he could take a toddler so smoothly that its parents in the next room didn't hear a peep, take the parents too and drag out the pain if he wanted. A kindred could drag that sort of thing out a long time, if they were of a mind. *Plastic sheets drip with thick rivulets of kindred vitae. Mud of ash and blood pools thick and rich along the corners. The constant, chugging groan of a gas-powered wood chipper. A very long time.*

He didn't just want the adoptive parents of these kids to be afraid and suffering in their last moments, she realized. He wanted those who heard and knew to be afraid. He was willing to risk the entire Masquerade to make his point. Kelly pulled up at the curb in front of the narrow column of glass and steel where she leased her office space. The kindred acted like a creature not expecting to survive the culmination of his hunt, or at least desperate enough to not care. She recalled the arguments with Astrid, the defector elder for which she had been given responsibility by the Prince, where Kelly had dug in her heels and wholeheartedly refused to accept that her mission of vengeance was destroying her. She recalled fear in Wendy's eyes at what Kelly had begun to become in those nights of gleeful violence and revenge.

Where is Danny? She stepped out of the car and rode the elevator up to her office space. Fluorescent light hummed and buzzed to greet her in the otherwise empty offices. The shielded bulbs created a dream-like maze of reflections in the glass-walled spaces. Kelly stood in the reception area and considered them. She had fallen fast and hard to the Beast in the nights of her vengeance on Mayhew. How did the kindred continue? Was it the children? A cause? She had thought her own cause enough; it hadn't been. Did he know? Would there be light and intelligence in his eyes when at last she saw them? How far gone was too far?

Her phone chirped in her pocket and she dug it out. "Kelly Patterson," she greeted absently.

"It's Gory," came the shouted reply. She could hear a two-stroke in the red line, and the rush of air over Gory's mic was like a hairdryer going directly into her ear. She winced and held the phone a few inches from her ear. "I think I have something. Things, uh, got a little crazy. Wanted to make sure you got the news in case I don't make it back."

Kelly didn't detect a note of a joke, and when the blast of a shotgun from somewhere near, but not on, Gory's bike came through the line she asked very seriously, "Where are you?"

"Doesn't matter!" he shouted in reply. "Just listen! There *was* another one! Decker thought it was lupine shit, and so didn't say anything but—Shit! Look out!" he cried and Kelly could hear his voice fade away from the phone as if he had lowered, or dropped, it. The quick, successive *pack-pack-pack* of small caliber rounds distorted the tiny speaker with overdrive. Another three shots and what sounded like a dog the size of a Volkswagen yelping preceded his return to the line. Kelly's grip relaxed on the phone and the plastic groaned its relief.

“But I got the family’s name and the address! I checked it out, Kelly! No pictures, anywhere! Decker said there wasn’t a kid, but there sure as hell was a kid’s...” The bike engine complained and brakes squealed, and then the engine was rising slowly back to the red line. More gunfire from one of the other bikes she could barely pick out of the background hiss. “Room,” Gory finished.

“What’s the name?” Kelly said, and snagged the message pad and pen from Enid’s reception desk to jot it and the address. “Thanks, Gory. Be careful.”

“Eddy would kick whatever was left of my ass if I was!” The call disconnected and Kelly sat, looking at her phone. She might have managed to destroy—well, have destroyed—the artifacts under Marquette University that had drawn the garou like flies to shit, but the Anubi still, it seemed, found plenty to do. She dropped her phone into her pocket, and her pen bounced dully on the pad in her other hand.

Was it chance or design that the first had been taken in a place where the locals would keep it quiet without outside interference? The kindred had done enough research to know where his targets were, but did that extend to the domain itself? That would mean questions before he arrived, or else rely on whatever knowledge might remain from a previous visit. Either would leave a trail of memory, and kindred had very, very long memories. She headed for her desk and the more comfortable, multi-lined phone there.

Kelly plumbed the web of contacts and information brokers she maintained. She exhausted her internal rolodex of phone numbers, and traded on the prestige of her name and station to loosen tongues. She connected people who needed things others had, and so accepted gratitude from

both. No one remembered a kindred at any gatherings that fit the description, and she went so far as to call up Edie Hawthorn, harpy of Milwaukee for as long as any could remember. The street-level gossips and Anarchs that would trade domain intel for blood or money always denied involvement, but this time they did it in a convincing way.

As Kelly was casting yet another glance at her watch, and finally admitting that if she didn't head home at once she'd have to stuff herself in a maintenance closet to hide from the sun, she very much did not admit that the reason she had delayed so long in returning to her haven was avoidance of Wendy. She kept on refusing to admit that as she crawled dazed under the canopy of the bed and reached for the warm shoulder that rolled away from her.

August 8, 1999. 8:11 PM.

When Kelly woke she tuned her senses into the sounds and scents of her room and home. She found the announcer-excitement drone of a male voice from the sitting room a moment before she found the sedate pulse of the heart from a dozen feet away. Kelly opened her eyes to Wendy and saw the mortal sipping tequila and staring somberly in her direction. She repressed the instinctive urge to shy from such close scrutiny, even as she thrilled that Wendy should so enjoy to look upon her sleeping. That thrill she quashed, too. It rang hollow, as Wendy did not seem to be enjoying the view, nor the hard liquor filling the room with its stink. It was not so heavy as it might yet be, Kelly realized. She had not been drinking long.

“Hey you,” Kelly said in the moment during which she cycled through her read of Wendy and the room. “I’m glad you’re here, I wanted to...”

“No, me first, Kelly,” Wendy interrupted, and Kelly fell silent as she waited for the mortal to collect her words. She sensed a delicacy to the air, as if it were as brittle as thin ice and as likely to shatter with the wrong pressure. The wrong word could push the mortal away forever, she felt. “I want to say I’m sorry about last night.”

“You don’t have to be,” Kelly hastened to assure. “I was really just being overbearing. You were...” She bit off her babble of words. Stupid, she chided herself. *Shut up. Let her talk.* But she needed to hold on to Wendy, and it was so hard to believe the mortal would just *choose* to stay.

“Kelly,” Wendy said sternly, with a tiny scowl between her brows. “Stop. Stop it. I was cruel, and it was uncalled for. You were right, and I’m sorry. I should have called when it started getting late, and I shouldn’t have driven drunk, and...and I shouldn’t have said those things about you.”

Kelly almost blurted that no, Wendy *had* been right, and every word had been true and deserved. She didn’t. Instead, she cast her eyes down, and swallowed the sickening slime on her tongue as she lied to reinforce the mortal’s guilt. “I would never make you my slave, Wendy.” She couldn’t meet Wendy’s eyes as she delivered the deceitful promise.

“I know, Kelly. I didn’t mean that. I didn’t mean most of what I said last night, and I’d really prefer it if I were a blackout drunk today. I’ve felt really terrible.” Kelly ached both for Wendy’s hurt, and with the fact that she felt a blush of relief at that hurt. She told herself the former was the stronger, but it was a faint echo of memory of what mortal pain used to feel like compared to the fresh and hot guilt. “So, I’m sorry. I just feel...” Wendy paused and sighed. “So many people love you, Kelly, and I feel like I get lost in the shuffle.”

Kelly cried out abruptly and her eyes came up. “No, Wendy!” She shifted on the bed and scrambled for the foot, and leaned forward to lay a hand on Wendy’s knee. “You are always in my thoughts, even if I don’t always show you. Even when I’m distracted and moody. And...They don’t love me, they just think they do. It’s not love.”

“It is to them,” Wendy replied as she blinked rapidly against the rime of tears in her eyes. “I don’t know sometimes how I’m any different than they are. I worry that...” Wendy trailed off and frowned down into her short glass. She tipped it back and grimaced at the burn as she took the couple of ounces in a single swallow. “You manipulate them so easily. You ply their love for you like a game of chess. They would do anything for you, Kelly. Die, kill. Anything.”

Wendy looked up and Kelly withdrew her hand abruptly. She expected to see only the tired suspicion and pleading love in Wendy’s eyes, but she saw a glimmer of something else she couldn’t immediately identify. A light that was familiar, and yet not, a stranger seen at a party that you suspect isn’t so strange, but whose name refuses to surface. It was there, and gone, and Kelly covered her flinch with another shift so that she could rise to reach past Wendy for the bottle on the writing desk. She tipped it into Wendy’s glass. Wendy murmured her thanks as Kelly took her seat on the edge of the bed again. The bottle went to Kelly’s ankle, out of Wendy’s easy reach.

“Wendy,” Kelly began, hoping to explain it didn’t mean anything to her, that it was just a means to an end. That beside the things she had done just to survive, playing on someone’s emotions was nothing to lose sleep over. Wendy cut her off.

“Kelly, I’m tired of being the one to be manipulated. You

don't, not like them and I know that, I really do. But even when you don't, *I* would do anything for you. I would die for you, Kelly." Kelly's throat closed. She struggled to find even a shred of dishonesty in Wendy's voice, but all she found was a resigned species of honesty. Kelly hated that even with that, she still wondered. "I would *kill* for you, which is worse I think."

"I would never..." Kelly began, but again Wendy cut her off. "You've already admitted that you've killed more people than you can even remember, 'but definitely more than a dozen,' and I'm sitting in your *bedroom* drinking *tequila* at the foot of the bed *we share*." Wendy gave an unsteady kind of laugh and drained her glass again. When she didn't find the bottle on the desk behind her, but instead spotted it on the floor next to Kelly's foot, she set her glass aside. "I'm either crazy or...or I was born to be like you."

There, in Wendy's eyes, was that flash again. The stranger in the crowd that Kelly knew, and didn't, was glimpsed again, and with the second look recognized. That light in Wendy's eyes was ambition, or hunger. A cold species of it that Kelly had more often seen in the eyes of her fellow kindred than a mortal's, and that was why she had missed it the first time. She barely had time to register this, when it clicked with what Wendy was saying. She jolted upright on the edge of the bed.

"Wendy, no," Kelly said at once. She shot to her feet and strode away from the bed toward the far side of the room and the walk-in closet there. "No," she repeated forcefully. "No, you were not born to be like me. You aren't like me."

Kelly could hear Wendy's chin lift and her voice cooled a few degrees as she said, "You're right. I'm not. But I'm trying, Kelly. I've been trying so hard to come to terms with

everything. I can't stand the thought of you in anyone else's arms, hearing them tell you they love you. I know you have to, I know it's the safest way for you to get your blood. But I'm just a mortal." Wendy spat the word like an insult. "I still feel like that means something."

This was spiraling out of control, and Kelly could feel panic rising. She couldn't let Wendy leave, but if she denied her this? Even the hope of it? She didn't have to deny her, though, did she. No, she had that little boon tucked up her sleeve as yet, the sop for cleaning up the failure of Lucina's security around the exposed traitor Parovich. The blood hunt prize she had claimed but never intended to use, a card in her hand she could play at the game. She couldn't do that to Wendy, but she couldn't let her go. Kelly felt herself losing traction on her thoughts as they cycled back around again and again. Finally, she spun on Wendy, who sat sipping a fresh drink, and waiting for Kelly with her red-rimmed eyes.

"The things you would do, Wendy," Kelly started. She had struggled so hard to shield her from the worst, but had that not brought them here? Wendy had felt fear; perhaps Kelly should have inflicted terror, instead. "You are too good. You couldn't live with them. Please, don't," Kelly almost said 'want this' and caught herself at the last moment. "Ask this," she finished, instead.

"I can't live with the things I do *now*, Kelly," Wendy replied. "I go to bed every night wondering if this is the night you don't make it back before dawn, or whose bed you're in, or whether you're forcing someone *else* to love you. I spend all day trying to decode everything you do around me the night before, just so I can see how I fit into your game. Because I do, I know I do."

"You..." Kelly began, but couldn't finish the lie.

“Right,” Wendy said as if she could read Kelly’s thoughts. “Except I don’t know the rules, or whether you’re going to sacrifice me like a pawn, or if I’m a queen but think I’m a rook. And I don’t think you’ve chained me like you do Dorst, or Gordon, or Astrid, but you damn well manipulate me as much as you do them.” Kelly opened her mouth to protest, but Wendy held up a hand and shook her head.

“Stop, Kelly. You once promised to tell me everything you could, and we both know you’ve never kept that promise. I don’t know that you ever meant to, and I understand. I *do*. You pulled me around like a juice box in your backyard and chatted about my *flavor* with creatures that literally saw me as nothing *but* a juice box. And that tells me two things, primarily, although I didn’t really put it together until recently.

“First,” Wendy said and lifted a finger. She ignored the light rivulets of tears that leaked from her lids. “You wouldn’t have done that unless you were sure you could move me around the board against players of your game like that. I’d have just ended up an embarrassment, and since...since you didn’t kill me after or during, I think I did okay.”

Of all the denials Kelly could have spoken this evening, this was perhaps the only that would have been true. But she kept silent, unwilling to halt the tide of damnation that Wendy was unleashing on her. “Second, that as I am, I can’t be with you. I can’t know you, or your kind, as a mortal. I feel things you don’t seem to, and I can’t live with the things I have to do to be with you. I could, if I was like you. If you made me a kindred.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” Kelly whispered. How had this gone wrong? Why was Wendy doing this?

“I’m saying that I’ve seen enough now to know that I would

rather be the one manipulating than the one manipulated, Kelly. I'm saying I know you need me, and I'm saying I can't be with you unless you do this. I'm saying I would die for you."

Kelly stared at Wendy in horror. She could see the pain in Wendy's eyes, and hear it in her voice. It was tearing her apart to do this, but she was doing it. That light glowed full force, like a lighthouse through the fog of agony. *Stefan*. Why did she think of him now? Why did she feel like she did as she groveled at his feet and begged him to believe that she loved him, and wanted him, if he would only look at her, or talk to her?

"Wendy, I can't," Kelly pleaded and slumped to her knees. How had Kelly lost control so completely? "Please, don't ask for this."

Wendy sniffled, and set the half glass of tequila aside on the writing desk as she stood from the chair. She nodded and in agonized tones grated, "I understand, Kelly. Then I have to go."

Kelly threw herself to Wendy's feet and clutched at the cuff of her jeans as she cried out in wordless protest. Wendy stopped, but her eyes were closed and her face half turned from Kelly. This couldn't be happening. Wendy had said she would die for Kelly, how could she not stay for her? "Don't, Wendy! Don't go! Please, I can't..." Kelly trailed off into another shapeless wail of protest. She couldn't let her go, and she felt the Beast rising as the cuff of denim was pulled from her fingers. Wendy's heart thundered in Kelly's ears and her own blood scent ignited a throb in her fangs. Wendy, heedless of the change in Kelly's wails to be more properly described as growls, continued for the door.

If Kelly let her walk out into the hall, Wendy would never leave the house. She fought the need; she wanted to let

Wendy go because the alternatives were too terrible. She would have to restrain Wendy, force her blood into her, or else ensnare her with her Presence, wipe out Wendy's love even for herself in her devotion to Kelly. Either would make her stay; both would kill her. She felt the last dregs of her will draining away in the struggle to suppress the obsessive desire to possess Wendy. If she did nothing, Wendy would die. Kelly knew the Beast would take its due, and was already rising on her feet to do so. The Beast (*she*) would never let another have Wendy. As was eventually the fate of all mortals who clung close to kindred, all avenues from here led to Wendy's death in one way or another. Kelly couldn't let it be the final one.

"Wendy wait," Kelly grated as she swayed on her feet. "I'll do it. God help me, I'll do it."

Wendy stopped, hand on the door. She turned, and gave Kelly a searching gaze whose suspicion made Kelly ache. The mortal had once looked upon Kelly with such wonder and trust. Kelly had, as she was bound to do, destroyed both. How had she thought this situation would be tenable? How had she dared to hope that she could share simple companionship with a mortal, being the murderous monster that she was? She had been and continued to be a fool. How could she do this to Wendy, to make her into this thing? Because all roads now led to Rome, and Rome was burning.

Wendy moved toward Kelly, and tugged down the collar of her shirt as she craned her neck to the side. Kelly's eyes locked on the too-fast pulse of the jugular there and even now she thrilled at the memory of the taste of that blood. There would be so much of it, soon. Soon, but not now. Kelly held up her hand, and Wendy drew up, scowling.

“No, not yet, Wendy,” Kelly objected. “I need...” She needed what? Time to think, to find a way out of this. Some distance from the panicked horror of Wendy walking out of her existence, and the realization of what was being demanded. “I need to make some things ready. It isn’t... It’s not gentle or easy, Wendy. It’s not the sort of thing I could just do.”

Slowly, still searching Kelly’s eyes for any trace of deceit, Wendy let the collar of her shirt rise back to right and straightened her head. Kelly pleaded with her eyes for Wendy to stop this insanity, but the mortal did not. Instead, Wendy sniffled and seemed tired when she couldn’t read Kelly’s face. When she spoke, her voice was thick with misery, and it was as if Kelly heard an echo of her own heart from between the mortal’s lips. “I don’t know that you aren’t lying to me, Kelly.” She gave an agonized and agonizing bark of bitter laughter and shook her head. “How do I know this isn’t just another movement of my piece on the board?”

“What did you think would happen, Wendy?” Kelly asked. “Did you think you would just make the demand and like that,” she snapped her fingers. “It would happen? I’m sorry, I’ll do what you ask, but it can’t be now.”

At last Wendy seemed to give up trying to read Kelly’s face through her forking mask of crimson tears. She threw up her hands and turned toward the door. “Wendy!” Kelly called, and didn’t try to stop the step forward, nor the reach of her hand. Wendy drew her up short with a lifted hand.

“I believe you can’t do it now, Kelly. I’m probably the world’s biggest fool for it, but I believe it like I believe you would never force me to love you like Gordon and Dorst and all the others do. Do what you have to do to make everything ready. I’ll be at Daddy’s until you do.”

“But...” Kelly started, and then her voice failed her. Wendy sobbed and looked up, as if, absurdly, asking for strength from God.

“You’ll know where to find me when you’re ready, Kelly. I’ll be there. I promise, and if I can believe you, I don’t really think it’s too much to ask to want the same from you, is it?” Kelly closed her eyes and shook her head, unable to find words to answer. Why had she thought she could play at this game without a chance at losing everything? Every hand at this table was life or death.

Kelly’s eyes snapped open as Wendy’s footsteps receded into the hall, and she shot forward in a short dash. She couldn’t let the mortal go without seeing her one more time. Wendy’s shoulders shook in silent sobs and Kelly wanted to go to her and enfold her in her arms. She hated herself for not knowing whether it was to bite or soothe. The mortal heaved a heavy sigh as she reached the top of the grand staircase and lay her hand on the newel post. She turned a tear-streaked face toward Kelly and said with fierce, quiet sincerity, “Kelly, I love you. I’m sorry.”

Regrets or not, that light of determination and ambition was still hot and bright in her eyes, and Kelly sank to the floor in the threshold. Wendy turned and started down the stairs, slipping from view. A moment later, the closing of the door announced her slipping from Kelly’s world. The pain welled and crested and Kelly wailed her anguish echoing in the vast halls and vaulted ceilings. Dorst and Gordon were, this time, wise enough to leave her to her suffering, and she wept in solitude on the floor of the hall outside her room.

August 9, 1999. 12:09 AM.

Time lost cohesion. Kelly didn't know how long she lay curled on the floor, licking the blood of her own tears from her fingers just to try to retain some grip on her growing thirst. The chirp of her phone from her room finally broke through the bubble of seething torment and she collapsed on her back. The ceiling above was all but cloaked in deep shadow, and she thought how strangely comforting it felt to stare into the abyss over which she was poised. She sharpened her senses and dispelled the gloom as her phone chirped again. It sounded, for some reason, insistent.

Kelly forced herself to her feet, and glanced at the clock on the bedside table as she reached for the chirping Nokia. The glow of the liquid crystal display died even as she noted it was after midnight. She glanced at the display and saw the missed call notifications in the half dozen range. She sighed and the phone began to chirp again. "Kelly," she began, but her voice was choked and thick and she cleared her throat. "Kelly Patterson," she said with something approximating her usual professionalism.

"Jesus, where have you been?" Jonas wanted to know. "I've been trying to reach you for an hour. We've got another one, and a bit of a problem with this one."

Kelly pinched the bridge of her nose and found it slick. She lifted her fingers away and rubbed the thin coating of rich-scented blood between them. "What's the problem?"

"Check channel...six." Kelly scowled and her fingertips stilled. Jonas wanted to play coy *now*? Did he have no idea what kind of night she was having? No, she realized, he didn't, and more, he couldn't. She gathered her resolve and jogged for the sitting room.

"Hang on," she said as she took the stairs two at a time and ducked into the room whose windows looked out over the

roundabout out front. She grabbed for the universal remote and fed power to the large screen TV she had procured for the boys to while away their idle hours. She flipped to the indicated channel, and Jonas waited in silence.

“Thanks, Gavin. We’re here again at the scene of what some witnesses have described as a vicious and bloody murder.” The talking head in front of the camera, her compatriots glimpsed in shadows of movement around the edges of the shot, was named Barbara Dean by the graphic bar along the bottom of the screen. Behind her, light flooded into the cordoned off street in front of a door-less house. At a glimpse it looked to Kelly like the West edge of town. Decker’s turf, but he had a lot of turf. He was bound to miss something or other.

“Mister and Missus Paul Ackland were, according to neighbors, quiet people who had adopted a child in the last two years. They are described by neighbors to be friendly people, and a happy family. The neighborhood is in shock, though, as at eight-thirty-five pee-em, a scream was heard from their home at ninety-four Gerensfield Avenue. Police were alerted, but reportedly arrived too late to intercede in the vicious crime.”

Kelly let her eyes close and breathed, “Shit.”

“No kidding, sister,” Jonas answered unbidden. She shushed him and listened.

“Channel Six has exclusive footage of a conversation with one of the until-recently sleepy burb’s residents, who was among the first on the scene.”

The shot cut away from the cluttered circus backdrop to one that was from several hours earlier, and much lighter on the media attention. A grey-faced man with a long face and watery green eyes stood in an open-collared pajama

shirt. A voice off camera, not Barbara's, asked, "And what did you see?" The graphic bar at the bottom of the shot named him Kevin Fuller.

"There was blood everywhere," answered the man. Kelly's enhanced sight could practically see the tinge of green around the edges of his expression as he remembered. "I was there just after the cops got there. I wanted to go over and help when I heard the screaming, but... Well, I called the police." He was lying, she could see. It was only now, after having been confronted with the realities of what he had been morbidly fascinated by, that he felt the embarrassment of that urge.

"You could just see through where the door was, you know? It was right off its hinges; still is, over there." He glanced away from the camera and lifted an arm to point off to his right. He looked back. "Paul and Norma... Jesus, they were just everywhere. Pieces of them, I mean. Couldn't really...tell which part belonged to which person. What kind of an animal does that?"

The shot cut back to Barbara's blonde bob. "Officials have yet to release a statement, but stay tuned to Channel Six for breaking..." A burble of excitement and a surge of machinery, lights, and people closed on the line of yellow tape and the set-upon-looking uniformed officers behind it. A small cadre of police, one of whom Kelly recognized, were emerging from the open threshold of the house.

Captain Ben Stirges of the Milwaukee Police Department, with his broad shoulders and salt-and-pepper coif of short hair stepped out into the blare of light. The shot jostled as Barbara practically dragged her camera man toward him, but Kelly could see she would be back of the pack at best. She scanned the callsigns marked on the cameras and microphones closer to the yellow barrier and flipped to

Channel 24. Stirges marched straight toward her on the screen, and the out-thrust microphone. A man was asking, “Can you confirm that a child was in the house when the killings took place? Is this related to the recent spree killings?”

Kelly silently urged Stirges to keep walking right on past the cameras. The uniformed officers to either side were moving forward as if to clear a path for him, and Kelly cheered them on until the Captain put a hand on one’s shoulder and called them off. He stopped far enough in front of the crowd of cameras and mics that he wouldn’t be seen to be favoring any one of them and drew himself up. Questions continued to rattle off until he lifted his hand for silence. He got it over the course of a few seconds.

“I won’t be taking questions,” Stirges announced in his no-nonsense tones to open his statement. “But at this point we are prepared to make an official statement.” He rolled his eyes as his pause invited a wave of questioning anyways. He held up his hand and it tapered off. “At this point we are considering this a part of a serial killing, and a task force will be formed to handle the investigation. The FBI will be taking over the case, and working closely with local detectives, to capture the perpetrator before anyone else is harmed. I won’t be commenting on the details of the investigation, as it is ongoing. Thank you for your time.”

“Well you heard it here first,” Jonas offered wryly. “You heard from Gory? I think we’re going to need him.”

“Not since last night,” Kelly answered worriedly. She glanced at the door to the sitting room and smelled the remnants of her blood from the hall above. She wondered if Gory’s was not staining some road, or the fur of a garou. “I’ll see if I can reach him. Don’t suppose you have any

friends at the FBI?”

Myabb’s snort of derisive laughter answered the question well enough, but he added, “As if anyone would let me reach that high, yet.”

“You sound like an Anarch,” Kelly said distractedly as her gaze caught on her reflection as she turned back away from the door. She certainly looked like the monster she felt like. Jonas disrupted her self-focus with another snort. She continued, “Did you get a look at the house at all? Did he get to the pictures?”

“No, I didn’t,” Jonas answered dryly. “I thought it best to wait for the swarm of police to finish their work, and maybe for one or two of the television cameras to leave. *You* could always show up, cameras seem to love you these nights.”

“Keep me posted, Jonas,” Kelly ordered rather than rise to the bait. Jonas’s barbs were easy to ignore beside the twisting dagger of loss and anguish that seemed to be embedded in her heart. She disconnected the call after his flippant assent.

Everything was spiraling out of control. Kelly padded for the bathroom attached to her bedroom and the shower therein. She didn’t bother to flick the light on, she didn’t need it and she would rather not see herself in the mirrors in all her questionable glory just now. Wendy was gone—not all the way, not yet, but it was coming to that, too—and the kindred was putting everyone in danger. The FBI were not so easily swayed as a few beat cops and a local lieutenant. She turned on the hot water, ignored the cold tap, and stepped in behind the curtain. She didn’t bother to remove her underwear; best to soak the blood out of that first anyways. Kelly sat and hugged her knees as she let the needles of steaming water stab into her scalp. Her mind raced as her corpse slowly absorbed the heat that would

scald a mortal deep in its core so that she might, for a moment, forget most of the grave chill she existed in.

Kelly could try to pull her tenuous strings with Governor Thompson, but they were young and fragile yet. Such a tug could snap them, or otherwise taint them forever. Did that matter, with the fate of the Masquerade on the line? Her ties to Senator Kohl were stronger, but a request to deflect an FBI investigation, or at least ensure the agency didn't consider it more than a nuisance, would come with questions she wasn't prepared to answer for him. There was no rock star smile she could flash in front of a lens, or autograph to sign to make this go away. And the kindred was still out there. Was he done? Had the Acklands been the couple he missed before? Had he completed his vendetta?

She didn't think he had. She could still feel him out there. Like an echo of herself moving through the veins of the city. If pressed, she couldn't have explained her surety, but it was there. *Wendy*. The name rose unbidden and she shuddered under the blistering assault of the shower. Kelly craved going to her. It felt like acid eating away at her insides to refuse. Kelly had what she had wanted, didn't she? Time to think, and plot. To find a way to change Wendy's mind. *I believe you*. Kelly added a fresh swirl of pink to the water flowing down the drain before she reached to turn off the frigid water.

Kelly lingered in the burn of her thirst until it quashed the pain and panic. She couldn't, she decided, handle the FBI's involvement alone. That meant she had to turn to the creatures of the city who had the power and position to shape the fate of the nation. *They look at me like I'm nothing but a juice box*. Kelly slammed the door on the memory. She pulled jeans and a t-shirt on and reached for

her phone. The list of names she could connect to was short, but she couldn't afford the distraction of thinking of Wendy (*being gone*) before she selected one. Whichever she chose would be the final call; they would not react kindly to being double-dealt if Kelly shopped around or handed boons only to the one who proved successful first.

Detonas was her first thought, but the newly-minted Toreador Primogen had not claimed his seat by her graces, and he remained something of an enigma to her. She had ample evidence of his influence in the realms of fashion and society. Kelly had once thought his oversight of the city's print media was simply a means to advertise his gatherings, but had since found his uses of them canny by a long chalk. He might have the sway to dabble in the FBI's business.

Eduard was out, certainly. He was too brash, too focused on the Anarchs and their cause. He would tweak the nose of any elder on the continent without question, but Kelly strongly doubted he had the clout necessary to accomplish what she needed.

Edie? She had her fingers in pies all over the country, but mainly through the informal network of harpies. She could certainly tell Kelly what the director of the FBI wore and ate at the last state function he attended, or perhaps where he hired his drivers, but putting a bug in his hear to shut down, or at least minimize the importance of an investigation? Kelly thought it might be a stretch.

Jason, maybe. With his ever-ready need to be helpful which Kelly had proven all-too-eager to exploit on many occasions. Bereft, at least of late, of Mayhew's sway, the Malkavian Primogen was being guided back to the fold and under Kelly's thumb. But it was impossible to guess at what strings the elder Lunatic might have tied to his fingers. She

wondered if even Jason could keep track of them. He always seemed so...naïve.

Gracis was exiled, and he had poured all his and his clan's resources into his vendetta against Hrothulf. What was left for Belfort to mop up when she finally stepped up as Primogen of clan Ventrue would be crumbs and a cracked foundation. Even if Kelly was willing to bet on Gracis knowing something, Lucina wouldn't stand for his involvement. Then it would be Kelly's head on the platter right next to Gracis's. She discarded the idea almost as quickly as it rose from the murk of her thoughts.

Wendy. Damn you woman, Kelly thought bitterly. If you were going to leave, you ought to have done so completely. Just the thought of that gave her a shiver of dread.

Hrothulf himself was too far removed, too long absent from the world, to rely upon for such ties. Perhaps, were this Rome, she could have asked his help with the Senate there, but tonight? She had the vague idea he would give her the Final Death merely for disturbing him, or to wipe out the embarrassing debt he had accrued to her for his behavior at her house warming fete. *You dragged me around like a juice box.*

Kelly felt a slow, sinking feeling as she came near the end of her list. Lucina, then, she thought. Her former-Primogen-now-Prince had such a strangely broad reach. Kelly had not dug too deeply, but it seemed sometimes that whatever Kelly needed, the Prince was more than happy to provide for her Seneschal. With strings as light as silk and strong as iron attached, of course. And in the same breath to ask this, and announce a new childe? Mad as it was, Kelly saw no alternative. Everything was coming undone, all at once. She longed for the simpler nights before Merik and his

appointment to the Mask, when all she had to contend with was the crushing abandonment and worthlessness of Stefan entering the long sleep when his interest in her had waned. Kelly dialed.

“Good morning,” answered the cultured tones of Max, Lucina’s man-of-all-work.

“Good morning, Max,” Kelly answered. “It’s Kelly Patterson. I’m afraid I must impose on Lucina’s schedule, with my sincerest apologies.”

“I see, Miss Patterson. I understand.” She heard the slide of paper as he sedately turned pages in the day timer he kept for her. Kelly could practically smell the leather of its binding, so familiar with it had she become during her weekly reports. “Miss Lucina has an opening in her schedule two nights from now. If it suits, she can spare you ten minutes at two o’clock. She will be available in the lobby bar, here at the Hyatt Regency.”

“Thank you, Max,” Kelly answered, and hoped she sounded more genuine than she felt. “I look forward, as always. Good day to you.”

“And to you, Miss Patterson. Always a pleasure.” The line disconnected and Kelly lowered the phone. With it, her eyes sunk to the pad of dates and places. Two nights until she could see Lucina, four until the auction Dorst had dug up. It seemed an impossibly vast span of time, like when she tried to imagine what Astrid’s six hundred years must feel like to the traitor Fiend. Oh, how Astrid would gloat when she learned of Wendy’s departure. Kelly glanced at her watch, and lifted her phone again to dial Gory.

“You’ve reached Gregory Reynolds...” answered his voice mail before the line rang, and she endured his awkwardly-delivered invitation to leave a message.

“Gory, it’s Kelly. I need you to get in touch with me as soon

as you can.” She paused, and feeling the weight of loneliness hard on her shoulders added, “I hope you’re okay.” She disconnected the call and stared at the phone. She could call Wendy. The mortal would still be up, wouldn’t she? Probably weeping into her pillow, or on her father’s shoulder. Or had she, like Kelly, cried herself out for the night, and hardened herself at least for the moment to the pain? Kelly shoved the phone into her pocket.

Kelly curled up on the bed and wrapped her arms around her midsection as she bathed herself in the flames of her thirst. She wanted to hunt. Not the usual seduction of the unwary, the entreaties that they give themselves to her, the guiltless gift of blood that sustained her corpse’s animation. She wanted to chase down prey and taste the spice of adrenaline in the fountain of arterial spurt. She wanted to vent her pain and sorrow on another, and so try to excise it from herself. She shook and struggled and waited for dawn to take her awareness of this night that had started bad, and gotten so much worse.

August 9-10, 1999.

Distraction, and blood, filled her nights. Kelly could still almost feel the kindred out in the city, stalking his prey. She was, when not distracted by thoughts of blood and its procurement, sometimes distracted by wondering if he knew what kind of hornet’s nest he had kicked. Had he checked his next strike—and every hour she felt surer there *would* be a next one—because of the new attention, or was he oblivious to it? She felt the kinship to him again as she stalked prey over those nights, and struggled mightily to control the urge to violence that would mimic his own. Unlike he, she had the focus of will, or perhaps the

cowardice, to check herself.

Gory's silence and absence stretched, too, in those nights. She couldn't help but envision his ashes, baked in the sun to chalky white, on some empty stretch of backroad outside of the city. She more than once considered summoning him to her, but though impatience and fear were demanding, Kelly knew if he were able, he'd have called. She worried the last she would hear of his voice would be the fang-filled shouting over the phone as gunfire and motorcycles and lupines roared in the background.

Jonas seemed to slink into the shadows of the city, as he often did when not in direct line of sight, and for that she was grateful; she didn't want to deal with his flippancy or daring. It was how he handled pressure, but it got on her last nerve and she was already firmly on that herself.

Wendy refused to take her calls. Kelly was met only with a single question when she called the mortal or, in a fit of desperation the second night of her wait, the landline to her father's house. "Are you ready?" Even Wendy's father, though he didn't seem to understand why, gated her access to the mortal with the question. Kelly's achingly delivered "no" resulted in a dead line. When she had called back, losing her temper and deciding that she *would* be answered, the line rang to voice mail a dozen times before Kelly finally gave up. She hunted instead. She threw herself into crowds of the most beautiful mortals she could find, desperately searching for the one whose beauty would steal her heart and bring her to that (*filthy*) place where obsession bloomed. With Wendy gone, none could awaken the entrancement in Kelly. She burned too hotly with the humiliation of loss, and desperation to regain what she knew in her heart of hearts was gone forever.

Kelly was not disappointed by Astrid's response to Wendy's

departure. When she came to Kelly in the early hours of the morning she flaunted herself, and offered herself as a balm to Kelly's hurts. But what could the Fiend provide Kelly? Yes, she was beautiful beyond mortal measure, and had captured a piece of Kelly's heart, but that demand was quiet beside the reminder of Wendy's absence that Astrid's presence represented. The elder slunk about on the fringes when Wendy was present, only flaunting herself in glimpses and asides. Without the barrier of the mortal's affections she was emboldened, and Kelly found herself inventing reasons to be absent from her own haven more and more just to avoid the constant pressures of Astrid's blood-bound lust

August 11, 1999. 8:08 PM.

The media was scavenging the corpses of the kindred's victims, plucking the gory flesh from their bones for broadcast on the evening news. Though the police continued to refuse comment on the presence of children's bodies at the crime scenes, the media had dug up the connection to the now-defunct adoption agency. The headline Gordon showed to her dubbed him the Foundation Killer on the night she was to meet Lucina. She tossed the paper aside with a sound of disgust. How many nights had she mourned the sightless stare of those whose blood stained her hands, or hated herself as she gazed into those eyes that stared dully at her from her memory? And here was an entire breed of people who fed exclusively on such morbid fascination; worse, seemed to revel in it, and certainly profited from it. As loath as she was to give the kindred credit for gentility, the mortals still seemed too fascinated with their own destruction to steer their society

without the kindreds' guiding hand.

Kelly had Gordon bring her phone after he finished with her hair and before he swept the shorn locks of the evening's growth. She dialed Gory in vain, and hung up before the invitation to leave a message was fully delivered. Gordon was leaving as Kelly, after pulling on a pair of jeans and a turtleneck, paced her room and fought the urge to go to Wendy and see her even if from afar. She had just decided to trust her leash on her control when her phone rang and she dug it from her pocket to glance at the number on her way to the front door. She scowled as she saw, "Blocked."

"Kelly Patterson," she answered.

"Kelly," Gory wheezed. "Got your message. What's up?"

"Gory," Kelly exclaimed and stopped halfway down the staircase. "Where the fuck are you?"

"Ended up in Pewaukee. Thought I'd take a vacation." His voice was thick with pain, but she also could hear his effort to cover it. "Had a pushy travel agent," he added with a rasp of laughter.

"Jesus," Kelly said and pinched the bridge of her nose. Aside from Stefan, Gory was her oldest acquaintance since being brought under the fang. She wanted him close, at least back in the city. If he was chewed up badly enough to still be feeling it three nights later she also knew the risk to Milwaukee's mortals his presence would represent. It was easier to condemn Pewaukee's people; she had no responsibility for them. "Okay, Gory. Go enjoy your vacation. Get back as soon as you can—I'm sure you've seen the news by now—but I'll call if it's an emergency. Take the time you need until then."

"Yeah, I saw. We have a problem with the FBI, don't we?"

"Hopefully not after tonight," Kelly soothed. "Don't worry,

Gory. This is my sword to fall on. Go, rest. Get better. We'll talk soon."

"Roger," Gory signed off gratefully, and the line disconnected. One less concern, at least. Another could be eased if not alleviated if Wendy would just speak to her. With a sludge of dread cooling her heart, Kelly dialed the mortal.

Three rings, and then, "Are you ready?"

Kelly's eyes closed as she thrilled at the sound of the voice, even though it was thick with pain. "Wendy, don't ha—" She got no further before the line disconnected. Plastic creaked in her hand and she had to force her fist open before she damaged the phone. It went back into her pocket rather than risk destruction. Well, Kelly thought, Wendy might not be willing to speak to her, but Kelly could still go there to slink to the windows and watch the mortal. She could have that much of Wendy.

Kelly's feet carried her the two, large blocks out past the gated homes and community in which her own haven was raised. Lights still shone from windows in the houses between, but even those close enough to the road to bathe her silent form in their diffuse glow showed no eyes to make use of it. As the home she had bought Wendy's father to replace the house Mayhew had burned came into view she slipped into the shadows and crept the last few hundred feet, outside the reach of even the unheeded light.

Only two lights were lit in Mister Weaver's house, one from the large bay windows that looked into the living room, and another from a room Kelly knew to be the upstairs bathroom. She sneaked up across the lawn, low under the unlit windows and deep in the shadows behind the front garden's shrubbery, until she was near enough the window

that she could hear within as she sharpened her senses. From above, through the glass, she could hear the low, sincere drone of his voice.

“Why don’t you talk to her? She keeps calling. She’s trying to reach out. Your mother and I,” his voice hitched as he invoked the thought of his recently-departed wife. “Had our rough patches, but we got through them by talking them out. She seems to want to.”

Kelly heard, too, Wendy’s pained snuffles and rasping breaths and she closed her eyes against the echo of the pain they engendered. It quenched the spark of hope Mister Weaver’s exhortations on her behalf brought to life. She could hear Wendy’s refusal, even before she gave words to it.

“I can’t, Daddy. Not... This isn’t something we can fix with words. You don’t understand.”

“No, hon,” he answered gently. Kelly couldn’t help but hate him for being the one to soothe Wendy’s hurts in Kelly’s place. “I don’t. Will you explain it to me?”

Kelly tensed under the window. This had been a mistake, she realized in that instant. If Wendy said the wrong thing now, it was as good as if Wendy had killed her father herself. And, when he disappeared, Wendy would know why. She was too smart, and had been Kelly’s shoulder after too many such ‘clean ups’ to be blind to the meaning.

“I can’t, Daddy, I’m sorry,” Wendy answered, and Kelly very nearly sighed with relief. She fell back against the side of the house with her shoulders. The quiet bump made her wince and she listened as Wendy’s breath caught inside. She was moving for the street in a low run as soon as she heard Wendy’s slighter frame inside rush for the door. She cursed herself a fool as she sprinted away from the house, hoping she could get far enough away to disappear, and

knowing she wouldn't be to, as the front door swung open and banged against the wall inside.

"Stay away from here!" Wendy shouted at her departing shoulders. "Stay away from me, or I'll never come back, Kelly! I swear, I won't!" she added, and Kelly felt the bloom of humiliation and failure as Wendy's words chased her down the street. Even through that, Kelly couldn't help but cast a glance back over her shoulder. Wendy's taut posture of fury was silhouetted against the light from inside the house, arm lifted in an accusing point at the blur that faded into the darkness of night. In that glimpse, Kelly wasn't sure the humiliation wasn't worth the look, but as soon as she turned away she knew that all she had managed to do was whet the edge of her need to have Wendy back.

Kelly fled back to the questionable security of her haven and cloistered herself behind the locked doors of her rooms. When Astrid's hand rattled the handle, Kelly shouted her away and the elder's steps receded down the hall, more audibly than they had approached, after only a few seconds of hesitation. Finally, Kelly rolled away from the bloody mask she had wept into her pillow, briefly begrudged the loss of yet another and the growing cost of this emotional addiction she could never be free of. Kelly glanced at her watch. She had just time enough to page Eric to come to collect her in the town car, and prepare to meet with Lucina. Kelly pushed herself out of bed and determinedly slammed the door closed on the night's earlier events in the same motion.

August 12, 1999. 1:54 AM.

As Milwaukee's empty morning rolled past the windows, the streets filled with a low-lying haze of fog that had begun

to roll in off the lake, Kelly tried to order her thoughts. She knew Lucina would have no qualms about delving into her mind to pluck what she could, if Kelly failed to satisfy, but there seemed no satisfying way to report such abject failure. Lucina, though, wouldn't need the report, Kelly thought. Lucina would have seen the headlines, too. She was not so removed from the doings of her domain as to miss ripples so broad. The thought that the Prince would withdraw Kelly's permission to sire, and wall her off from Wendy forever, kept interrupting her efforts.

"We're here, Kelly." Eric's voice interrupted her thoughts with the tone of a repetition. Kelly blinked, seeing at last the brightly lit hotel outside the window of her car. She glanced over at him and hardened her expression to a species of professional neutrality when she saw in his face an edge of concern. "You want me to wait, or...?"

"I won't be more than half an hour, Eric, yes," Kelly answered and reached for the door handle. "We'll be going back to the house, after." The kindred driver, her scandalously-respected Anarch driver known locally as The Driver even before his employ to her, simply nodded in the rearview mirror. She thought, as she did from time to time, that her skills in her car matched to his in this one would still be a poor match for him. This time, she added a caveat that he ought to stick to driving. She hit the doors of the hotel a moment later.

Kelly's gaze drifted to the right toward the lobby bar as she entered. She swept past the concierge with only a polite smile and a purposeful step to answer his impersonally friendly greeting. The last of the night's patrons was leaving, or being helped to leave, headed mostly for the elevators to rooms, but in a few cases to cabs at the door. Kelly went against the flow and stepped into the bar. Senses sharp so that she could practically tell what each of the thin stream

of mortals that shuffled past had been drinking that night, she scanned the nearly-empty barroom.

The lounge pianist had left long ago, and his black grand in the corner toward the front windows sat ignored and unlit. In his place, the house speakers piped a low-level feed from WBIT and the tail end of Barth's show. Under dim lights turned down after last call, a single, tired-looking waitress busied and wiped down the last of the tables. Behind the bar ahead of Kelly, the young man with the frosted hair and tight black t-shirt stretched over a gym-toned build was stacking glasses on the shelves. In the corner to her left, she found Lucina at last. The Prince, though physically barely more than sixteen, had had more than enough time and experience to craft the touches that would age her face enough to gain entry to such places, and she was so made up this evening. She wore, as was her habit, a gown, but this one by her usual standards would be considered casual, if a gown could be said to be casual. The red of its simple lines set off the faint, strawberry blonde highlights in her hair. Across from her in the same booth was an older man, approaching his mid-thirties by Kelly's guess. He had the ruffled-suit look of a traveling salesman, or a man in for a conference at the hotel. He was not unpleasant to look upon, as men went, but the leer in his smile at Lucina took any beauty from his features. If only, Kelly thought, he could see the calculating predator in Lucina's eyes when she looked across the table at him as Kelly could.

The bar tender turned from his task and announced, "Sorry, past last call. We're just closing up here." His smile was tired, but polite and practiced. Kelly saw him enough that she should probably know his name, but she realized she didn't.

"I'm with her," Kelly said with an apologetic smile and a

subtle tip of the head toward Lucina's booth. Kelly followed his eyes to her table, and saw the Prince, still holding the subtly lascivious (*hungry*) smile she had been showing the leering man, looking over. She gave the boy a barely discernable nod. He shrugged back at Kelly and resumed his task, and Kelly leaned into the bar to watch him. "Good tips, tonight?" she inquired to pass the time.

"This isn't exactly Starscape," he answered over his shoulder with a small smile. "But we do alright. Tonight was average." Kelly nodded and glanced to the corner as DJ Barth came back on the mic to sign off. Kelly rolled her eyes and tried to tune out the radio as she picked out his words.

"That's it for me, ghosts and ghouls. Remember to play safe, and never let 'em see you coming. I'm going to leave you with one from Milwaukee's very own Kelly Patterson. Yours truly introduced her to stardom, I don't mind telling you all. Great gal, but she has one helluva..." He played the cougar-growl "BITE!" station identifier. "Don't let the sun catch you sleeping, folks. This is *What Lies Inside*."

Lucina was slipping a room key to the man as the first, heavy guitar chords were coming through the speakers. Half in a daze he hurried off toward the elevators. Kelly waited until he was out of the bar before she got up from her lean and headed to the booth and waiting Prince.

"Thank you for seeing me, Lucina," Kelly said, and waited until the hungry-eyed Prince tipped a hand toward the far side of the booth to sit.

"I could hardly refuse you, Kelly," Lucina's musical voice replied, polite over a heart of ice. "I have rather supposed you wished to speak to me regarding this unpleasant business in the news these last nights."

Kelly made no effort to conceal the truth of that, but instead essayed for a penitent tone when she replied. "I'm

afraid so, Lucina. The police stumbled out ahead of me on the matter, for which I have no excuse to offer except to say that I *had* already been working on the case before that...exposé.”

Lucina’s smile held neither mirth nor warmth. “Oh, Kelly,” she oozed. “I think we both know you have no problem leashing the police department at need.” Kelly’s nod allowed that that was true, and a beat of pause stretched out between them. Lucina glanced at her watch. They both knew what Kelly was there for, but Lucina wanted it said. Perhaps Kelly’s humiliation was to be an appetizer before the man upstairs. *Stefan*. Go away, she silently commanded her sire’s presence in her mind.

“I need your help with the FBI, Lucina,” Kelly said, and lowered her voice. It was both the habitual effort to conceal delicate conversations from mortals, and an effort to make private to Lucina and herself the admission.

“I’ve already made some calls,” Lucina assured coolly as her eyes half-lidded in a reptilian pose of relaxation, or perhaps satiation. “There happened to be an agent of theirs without much caseload to send for the case. Poor dear is leading into his retirement. I do hope he won’t have much trouble clearing the case quickly. I was, of course, pleased to put my hand to helping you do your job, Kelly. Whatever you need. Though, I must admit you tax my resources at this point already. One does not easily accrue favors of the sort I expended on your behalf.”

“I understand,” Kelly said, and did. The barrel she was bent over was nearly as humiliating as having to admit she needed the help. Only Lucina’s polite refusal to outright state the nature of the bindings to which Kelly was offering her wrists was keeping the flaming guilt from searing its way

free. Kelly swallowed her desire to destroy anyone who might have witnessed her shame. “There’s something else, Lucina,” Kelly added after a moment, as Lucina planted her hands on the table as if to shift from the booth. The look the elder slid to Kelly chilled her to the bone.

“Mm?” Lucina inquired idly, eyes intense and demanding and at complete odds with the casual interest in her voice. It seemed Lucina was already seeing the man upstairs as she gazed across the table at Kelly.

“I’ve made...” Kelly bit off her words and paused. She started again with, “I know who it is I will be giving the Embrace.”

Lucina’s distracted attention honed in more keenly on Kelly, and Kelly ran hands of blackjack through her mind in a frantic flurry of imagined cards. The Prince’s smile dimmed a degree, and she settled more fully back into the booth across from Kelly. *She’s going to revoke permission*, Kelly thought, sending decks of cards spiraling out of view in her thoughts.

“So soon?” Lucina inquired too-casually. “Not even a full year in the selection.”

“Do you not believe in love at first sight, Lucina?” Kelly responded and tried to force a light smile that wilted almost as soon as it bloomed. Lucina’s never wavered, nor did her gaze.

“Kelly, I’m an Artiste,” she said at last. “I am all too keenly aware of love at first sight. It is my humble experience,” she added in a tone that lacked even a whit of humility, “that such infatuations are...too short to endure the hardships of the Embrace. One would do well, I think, to consider this. You will gift the Embrace to this Wendy Weaver you have been keeping?”

Kelly rankled at the unsaid, “as your pet.” But she also knew

it wasn't an unfair assessment. It simply struck too close to her heart for comfort, and the raw wound there where Wendy should be was still wet with the blood of its infliction. "My Prince remains wise in all things," Kelly said, and forced a politick tone to accompany her bow of head.

"Well, my Seneschal," Lucina replied in a tone just touched with wryness at the two having slipped into formal titles. "I hope you have made your decision well. I would be most distraught if your first Embrace should prove to be a disappointment. Such opportunities are not granted lightly, or often."

Kelly dropped her eyes and looked at her hands laced on the table in front of her. Lucina's implication was clear. This was not a card for Kelly's hand she would be likely to draw again soon. She nodded her understanding. "Of course, Lucina. Thank you for your understanding."

"Kelly, you don't need my understanding. I would not presume to step into so...intimate a thing as you intend, but I would be derelict in my duties to the Tower should I not caution you against the mistakes of your predecessors." Kelly nodded again and raised her eyes to Lucina's once more. She hoped she showed the determination she tried to cover her pain with. If Lucina saw behind the veil she made no sign, and simply moved to slide from the booth. Kelly scrambled to keep up with the sudden shift.

"Good day to you, Kelly," Lucina said politely, and Kelly returned the farewell as the Prince drifted off toward the lobby and the elevators that would take her to the man waiting upstairs for her. Half a minute later and Kelly was back in the car, headed for sanctuary.

August 12, 1999. 2:31 AM.

Kelly bid Eric farewell and watched the baleful glow of the tail lights until they turned from the end of the drive. Her gaze drifted toward the carriage house and the panes of illumination behind which Astrid would be lurking. She sighed and glanced at her watch. There were still a couple of hours to dawn, and she had no interest in spending them dodging the Amazonian woman's attention. Kelly turned from the walk up to the front door and instead circled around the house toward the swale of lawn that led down to the boat house. She could see the scantily-clad form of Astrid jogging toward the boathouse as she pulled out of the slip into the lake. She felt at least a small burst of victory as the jogging steps slowed to a stop when Kelly made sharply for open water.

Two miles from shore, Kelly cut the engine and drifted in fog. No one but the most diehard of fishermen would be out on the water at this time of morning, and there were none of the distant, fuzzy shapes that would indicate running lights on such craft. Soon, the water traffic from the city shoreline to the south would begin, but for now she was able to find a bit of solitude and she stepped out from behind the pilot's console. Kelly stood at the prow and stared off into the ineffable distance. The soft, rhythmic sound of the water against the hull was soothing, as if she were listening to the heartbeat of the morning.

Where are you? Kelly thought into the fog at the kindred. The Foundation Killer. A frisson traveled the length of her spine as she had a sudden, fearful premonition that he would emerge from the fog and the water, dripping with menace and fangs gleaming in the running lights, drawn to her by the pull of her Presence. He would like this fog, she knew. She liked the fog. It was comfortable anonymity; a reprieve from prying eyes and the need to be something—

anything—other than the killer she knew herself to be, and which she always thought others must see. Her smile might dazzle, her fans might yearn for her, but she was never able to shake the idea that somehow they knew her for what she was. Here, out on the water, with nothing but her thoughts and the kindred, she felt relieved of the burden of normalcy.

Where is Danny? Kelly thought into the fog at herself. The secret killer. She didn't think the kindred was taking them to dispose of later, or elsewhere. He had, obviously, no compunctions about brutality or bloodletting. He cared for them; she had felt as much. How many? Four, in Milwaukee. That they had found. Others, elsewhere, she thought. Why those four? If Jonas was right, there were dozens of children in the city placed by the Dream Maker Foundation for Families.

"Talk to me," she whispered to the kindred and the fog. Nothing but the whisper of breeze and the lap of water answered her. Her hands came to rest on the railing as she leaned out over it. She felt poised on the edge of motion, and an insane urge to simply dive over the side of the boat and swim down to the bottom of the lake overtook her. She envisioned diving down until she could sink into the silt at the bottom and sleep the long sleep. It would be easier, but there was still a piece of Kelly that rebelled against what she had been made and wouldn't let her turn her back on the children (*Danny*). She could save them, yet. She could save Wendy, yet.

Kelly glanced at her watch. Not quite an hour to dawn, a little less until she was dragged to her death-like slumber. She dug in her pocket for her phone as she stepped silently back behind the pilot's console. The twin engines turned over as she dialed, and she throttled up toward shore as she

lifted the phone to her ear.

Jonas started to answer three rings in and then cut off with, “Jesus, what are you doing, mowing your lawn?”

“Good morning, Jonas,” Kelly soothed.

“Oh, it’s you,” he answered sourly. “I’m not leaving my haven at this time of night.”

“I just wanted to let you know I heard from Gory,” Kelly returned. “He’s fine. He’ll be back in town in a few nights.” She hoped.

“I’m happy for you, and he,” Jonas sneered.

Kelly’s fangs slipped free of her restraint. They were thick in her voice as she spat back, “Mr. Myabb, whatever familiarity I allow you as part of our work with the Mask, I *am* still the Seneschal of this domain, and Gregory is the Primogen under whom you whip. Find respect on your own, or be taught it.”

There was a beat of pause over the line. When Jonas replied there was a touch of surprised chagrin under the surface tones of apology. “I...spoke out of turn, Miss Patterson. I apologize. I am indebted by your forbearance.”

Kelly let him twist for just a moment before she set his feet on solid ground. “Think nothing of it, Jonas,” she said in conciliatory tones. “I was glad to do you the favor of informing you of your master’s well-being.”

“Of course,” Jonas answered slowly, uncertain enough to hesitate before he addressed her by name.

“Good day, Jonas,” Kelly replied. “I’ll be in touch.” He bid her farewell as well, and she returned her phone to her pocket to rest both hands on the thin metal ring of the boat’s wheel.

Kelly eased back on the throttle when the bulk of the boathouse rose ahead above the low fog. She craned to

guide the cruiser into the slip. She leapt from the prow with the line, tied off, and jogged for shelter. As the sky lightened to grey to the East she tried not to look too closely, but her gaze was drawn inexorably toward the threatening dawn. Were she a mortal, she thought she might be tingling with adrenaline. Instead, she felt only a crawling dread that nearly dragged her feet toward the tool shed, as the first visible escape from the first rays.

Kelly plunged into the house at a dead run, briefly glad that Astrid was not watching from the window as she fled across the back patio. She experienced a moment of pang when she fought the instinct to slam the door on the coming dawn for fear of waking Wendy. The door closed barely harder than necessary and then she was taking the stairs two at a time, teeth gritted with the effort to resist the dragging lethargy that fought to pull her down. As she slammed the door to her bedroom, and at last felt the strength go out of her, she had time to curse Astrid for chasing her out of her own haven, and her own weakness for allowing it. Then she was falling for the plush carpet. She stretched her hands out and tumbled into the shadows between the fibers and the heart of darkness within.

August 12-13, 1999.

As Kelly's waking hours slipped past, so did her grip on her temper. She was torn by demands on her attention and time, and all of them drew blood. The kindred had gone to ground, or left. Like a spider's egg sack freshly burst, Kelly's presence swarmed over her web of contacts, but the only meal her efforts found was their mother, and she was consumed in tiny bits by the frustration of failure. Hopeful whispers spoke of his departure after his appearance on the

news, but she knew better. He wasn't fleeing; she wouldn't be, in his shoes. He was beyond fear of death. *I can save them.*

Wendy would not go. The echoes of her lived in the house, and wherever Kelly turned she found them. Keyed up as she was, feeling tingling premonition strongly and constantly enough that she spent nearly as much time looking over her shoulder as in front of her, she kept stumbling into the pieces of Wendy that wouldn't disappear. When she lifted the lid of the Grand in the conservatory, she flashed on Wendy in her arms, the smell of expensive wine and secondhand smoke on her skin, the feel of Kelly's touch on her hips, the cold brush of lips against throat, the graze of fang against flesh. When she opened a closet to grab a towel, she was giddy with the anticipation of seeing Kelly's face, the cool surprise that she imagined only she could see. Hide it here, she thought, behind these robes. Kelly shoved aside the robes, dragged them out of the shelves, and then all the towels besides, in search of the tiny black box that Wendy had thought to hide. She pulled open the fridge to cook the one meal she was good at for the boys on the night before the auction, and saw Kelly twirl between the sizzling pans and bubbling pots, a wash of bright, summery colors in the warm kitchen light, and wanted so badly to see her in the glow of the day, and know what that singular golden glow would do to the blonde of her hair.

August 13, 1999. 8:07 PM.

When Kelly woke on the night of the auction, Gordon was waiting for her. He gulped at whatever he saw in her eyes as she turned them slowly in his direction from the bed. Kelly crooked a finger and he set the clippers and smock aside

and scurried to her side. His heartbeat was distracting and enticing both as it quickened with excitement, and with her eyes closed she almost managed to imagine that the warmth that he fed into her was Wendy's. The delusion was overwhelmed by the distinctly not-Wendy scent and feel of his weight on her all too quickly. Kelly was brusque about her snack, bleeding him without her usual attention to his enjoyment. The confused disappointment on his face afterwards kept her eyes in her lap rather than look up at him as he cut her hair to the length the public expected to see it. She dressed quickly and discretely in an off the rack pantsuit, and was off the grounds and cruising within half an hour of waking.

She did not have any notable experience with auctions, and she wasn't certain what she expected, but the plain, two-story office block on the poorer edge of downtown was not where she thought she would end up. As she parked in the lot and made for the ground floor she felt like her trepidation should be sparking out of her in lightning-blue arcs. She had to force herself to pull open the door, and was for a moment certain the kindred would be waiting on the far side.

What she found instead was a clinically-lit space with a carpet that remembered the long-standing maze of cubicles that was no longer its burden. A couple dozen folding chairs were set out in two blocks of twelve with a narrow aisle down the middle. A man sat behind a six-foot folding table, with a small, D-ring flip chart that had half its compliment of cards already flipped over behind. Far from the animated quick-talking her imagination had led her to expect, he sedately collected bids from the half dozen people scattered widely throughout the collection of seats. She thanked a second, younger man with a fair bit more

hair than the auctioneer perfunctorily as he handed her a program and a paddle, then swept her eyes over the bidders. Kelly didn't have to search long. The stern-faced, dark-haired figure of Jillian stood out to Kelly at once. Of all her various shocks and disappointments in attending this auction, this surprise was the greatest. The Giovanni met Kelly's eyes across the space, and indicated the seat next to her with a tilt of her head. Kelly's tingling apprehension did not lessen as she made her way toward the offered chair, but she was already trying to piece together what the connection could be. From what Kelly had heard and gleaned, the Giovanni hardly needed to rip people to pieces with their bare hands. As she sat down she glanced through the program and allowed the initial blush of curiosity and interest her unnatural allure tended to engender fade from the smattering of mortals in the room.

"I didn't realize you were in the market for new office furniture, Miss Patterson. James had said you only hired the two new associates, and had already squared away their work spaces," Jillian offered in the barest whisper.

"I was thinking of opening a medical clinic, and thought I'd come to see what was on offer," Kelly countered, a touch more sharply than intended. "It came to my attention that Dream Maker Foundation for Families was liquidating at this auction and I simply had to see for myself."

Jillian's smile was cool, and she crossed one leg over the other at the knee under the hem of her simple black pencil skirt. "A matter I'm not unfamiliar with, though it's one that until recently was known only to a few. If you're here to ensure there's no risk of exposure from the media or police to our shared secret, then let me set your mind at ease. Despite the recent attention, there's nothing to find."

"Not nothing, if I'm sitting here," Kelly offered dryly. She

paused as there was a small bidding war between two of the mortals in attendance over a bank of server equipment so that her whisper might be heard by the kindred beside her. When it had been settled she continued, "What's it got to do with," Kelly's voice caught, and at the last moment she diverted the path of her tongue. "The kids," she finished. She had been about to say Danny. Jillian glanced around as if she expected the thin whisper to travel. It hadn't.

"It is not...directly related to the work of the agency. It was something of a pilot project for maximizing efficient use of resources. The whole thing goes back to an agreement we made with Merik long before his...unfortunate fall from grace."

"Isn't that convenient," Kelly replied dryly.

"It was at the time, yes," Jillian agreed easily. "Old families can become...insular. It benefits us, from time to time, to arrange for intermingling. There was a time when such a thing was done simply and between the families involved, but in these nights there is an unfortunate amount of oversight. At least, here in America."

Kelly got the distinct impression that Jillian still had not reached the pertinent revelations. She pressed, rather than let the woman dance around them. "Are these hits targeted at favored sons of your family, then?"

"Not hardly," Jillian answered, bemused. "No, as I said, this recent misfortune is not directly related to the purpose of the venture. It is a byproduct of a side venture we attempted to shoehorn into the project, and which Merik was glad to give his blessing to for a piece of the profits." Jillian shifted to cross the other leg instead. "We only noticed the pattern when the news broke and the company's name hit the headlines."

“We have interests with certain individuals overseas with whom we make arrangements for arrivals and departures from various locales,” Jillian said carefully. “As it happens, sometimes, they end up with clients who cannot fully pay their fare, or else arrange for alternative methods of payment instead of monetary. In some of those cases, we help desperate couples who wouldn’t otherwise qualify for public adoption to have private ones.”

Kelly felt sick. It was one thing to breed your family like a stable of prized thoroughbreds as Jillian had first seemed to imply, but human trafficking was something altogether different. People bought and sold like commodities, taken from their homes and families or sold by members of the same to pay their own way. How many of those who sold their children ended up sold themselves? Kelly couldn’t make herself believe the core intent of the Giovanni’s interest in the practice was to arrange adoptions for otherwise-fit couples. Sex trade? Almost certainly, she decided. Her stomach knotted, and she crushed down her disgust as she forced herself to reply in a neutral tone. “So, what’s the pattern?”

Jillian opened her mouth to respond, but flicked her gaze to the man at the table. She closed her mouth and lifted her paddle as he announced the Dream Maker lot. Kelly found no reprieve in the pause. She kept visiting the people she had glimpsed in exposés and criminal investigation files. Here, beside her, was a woman who made those nightmares real for mortals around the world. Or, at the least, for mortals in Milwaukee. And Kelly was about to make whatever deal she had to in order to get Jillian’s cooperation. Did that make Kelly less culpable? She didn’t believe it for a second. Jillian won her bid, and Kelly shut the door on the guilt.

“All of the children thus far involved were arranged by a

single contractor we've had dealings with from time to time. I did a little digging once we found the connection, and I'm told a conversation with the contractor was arranged with some measure of success." Kelly suppressed a shudder at the imagined fate of that person; she doubted the Giovanni treated gently with those who risked exposing their secrets.

"Apparently the children were originally believed to be a sort of windfall of misfortune and it was a particularly profitable venture for us to arrange their adoptions. We have just learned, however, that they were instead all the product of...motivated parents in a single batch of private arrangements. I just this evening received the report from the team of investigators we sent to the village where the arrangements were made, according to the contractor. There was not much for them to find; it had been a casualty of a local conflict some two years ago."

Kelly closed her eyes. A village wiped out, its children sold, who knows what done with the other survivors. *Danny*. She had to swallow several times to control the roiling of her stomach. "How many more here in Milwaukee?" she asked in a husk of a whisper.

"I had a feeling I would soon be needing the list, and I have it with me," Jillian answered casually. Kelly's eyes snapped open and her gaze cut to the side. "Two have since moved to Los Angeles and Seattle respectively, the other three remain." Kelly watched the kindred dip her fingers into her purse and withdraw a twice-folded piece of paper. Kelly accepted it numbly, and stared at it in her lap for a moment. She didn't open it. "Please tell your man Gordon to stop asking questions," Jillian added as Kelly stared. "I've been gentle with him thus far, out of respect for our existing arrangements, but he is a little too capable for others' tastes."

“You’ve cost this domain a great deal, Jillian,” Kelly finally managed, as she breezed past the implied threat to her ghoul. She was so furious she had frozen down to her core. Eight people dead, just in those she could count. How many more in the massacre that had spawned this spree that had tipped the kindred over the edge? *I can save her.*

“On the contrary,” Jillian replied, and made as if to collect her purse and program and paddle. “I’ve just placed in your hand the means to bring the man to heel. I’m impressed you traced it back here as quickly as you did, but make no mistake, Kelly. We have done *you* a great favor in putting your nose to the scent.”

Kelly’s eyes shifted like glaciers toward Jillian, and then followed her up as the woman stood. Kelly lifted herself to her feet and turned to follow Jillian off to the side, feeling the points of her fangs trembling at the limits of restraint. Jillian’s casual smile as she stopped to turn back and face Kelly sundered a deep fissure through the ice encasing Kelly’s heart, and from the abyss rose frigid words. “It ends, Jillian. Shut down your plans for a new clinic. I want it out of my city. This ends *now*.”

The Giovanni’s smile quirked at one corner, bemused. “I’m afraid not, Kelly. Did you think we simply continued to operate through the regime change in Milwaukee without first acquiring Lucina’s cooperation?” Jillian gave a low chuckle. “We do not bow to the Tower, Kelly, but neither do we disrespect it. We are willing to go along to get along, when it suits, and so is Lucina.”

Kelly reeled. The girl who plied the hearts of the city’s few remaining rich to fund an afterschool band program couldn’t possibly, on the other hand, profit from the *sale* of mortals. Did the involvement extend beyond the adoptions? How dirty were Kelly’s hands for having put

Lucina in the seat of power to encourage this? What about James? Was his quest for redemption tainted with involvement? How could she look at him across the glass wall that separated their offices and not tear his throat out, now? Lucina was far beyond her, but Jillian's would-be childe was only mortal, as yet. "James?" Kelly asked. "Him too, then?"

Jillian shook her head. "He isn't involved; it is not an aspect of the family business he has reason to be involved with." Kelly clung to that small boon as if it were a life preserver in a tumultuous sea.

"This isn't over," Kelly said. She lifted the folded sheet of paper between index and middle fingers between them. "I won't deny you've helped, but all this comes back on you no matter what deals you had, or have."

Jillian's lips lost their smile, and her eyes cooled to match Kelly's frozen fury. The tingle of premonition traipsed down Kelly's spine, but this time it felt like the gentle brush of fingertips colder even than her grave chill. She felt suddenly sure that there was something at her back, and she need only turn her head to see it. She fought the urge and held Jillian's stare as the woman said, "Don't make an enemy of me, Kelly. We've had profitable dealings before and I see no reason that shouldn't continue, particularly given you are considering taking on a childe. I've never had any intention of involving you in this aspect of my affairs. It obviously doesn't suit your temperament. But if you meddle in it there will come a time when others with an interest in the proceedings will take notice, and then it will be you they go to, after they finish with me."

"Are you so certain Lucina would simply roll over and let you have me?" Kelly countered.

“Are *you* so certain she wouldn’t?” Jillian countered, and Kelly opened her mouth to blurt her denial when it froze on her lips. She wasn’t, certainly not after tonight. *Did you think we simply continued to operate through the regime change in Milwaukee without first acquiring Lucina’s cooperation?* Jillian glanced at her watch, and then up to the door. “I’ve an appointment to keep, Kelly. Lovely to see you again.”

Kelly was off-balance enough that to stop Jillian’s departure would require her to make a scene. A quick glance across the diminished crowd showed that her rage was already sending out enough subtle empathic cues that the conversation had been drawing some looks. She fought both the urge to suffer the embarrassment just to assert her authority to stop Jillian from walking away from her, and the power in her blood that captured the hearts of those around her. Instead, she watched the dark woman leave the building, and then stared at the folded page in her fingers. Had she not already committed herself to whatever deal was necessary to see the killings stop? Here, then, was the cost and the payment.

August 13, 1999. 9:14 PM.

Kelly headed for home. She didn’t want to believe Lucina had been complicit with the human trafficking that Jillian and her clan had been funneling through Milwaukee. She couldn’t, though, convince herself the Prince was guiltless. The elder was fanatical in her devotion to the arts. Did that extend to willingness to buy and sell human beings like chattel in order to fund her pet projects? Kelly wasn’t sure it didn’t. She couldn’t help but wonder if, had she sought to push another to fill the gap left by Merik’s exposition and deposing, she might have put a stop to the Giovanni efforts

in Milwaukee. She turned the problem over and over, felt along its seams with the fingers of her mind, but by the time she was parking in the four-car garage at the top of her driveway she had no comfortable answer. She wasn't sure if any of the kindred in the city who could reasonably have claimed the Princedom would have done any differently when approached by the Giovanni. Their reasons would be different, but the profit motive would remain. She killed the engine and sat in the dark, listening to it tick-tock toward coolness.

Kelly tasted the revulsion coating her tongue like sewer sludge and twisting like a rope of ice through her intestines. Was *she* the one that was wrong? Was this lingering aversion to seeing the mortals (*kine*) as a commodity a piece of herself that she was due to shed in order to properly tend her role as the right hand of the Prince? She remembered how often she had looked upon the mortals, with their ignorance of the forces and devils that worked in the night's shadows, and thought them children who strayed sometimes too far from their apron strings. Perhaps this, then, was the next logical step. Perhaps what she felt now, then, was only a passing disgust that would fade as had the revolt against the idea of drinking blood to survive. Lucina had seen entire populations born, live, and die in her unliving memory. Would Kelly, too, leave behind the personal ties she felt to the mortals bought and sold for kindred gain? She wasn't sure which answer she would prefer. If not, then she may lack the conviction necessary to support the Camarilla as she craved to. If so, then what did that say about her heart?

She unfolded the paper and looked at the neatly printed black text that marched in precise lines across the page. Three remained in the city. The kindred had come for

vengeance, but he was taking the children. Where, she wondered? More, which of the three would be his next target? One of these families, newly minted and flush with love and hope and all unaware of the misery that had been the spawning pool for their chance at happiness, was being stalked. But Kelly could almost hear the kindred's steps ahead of her now, and as she stepped from the car she imagined she could smell the old blood on him in the breeze that teased the leaves on the grounds. He could be, even now, striking out at one of them, but she was close on his heels. It wouldn't be long now, and then she would have him.

As Kelly took the stairs up to the front door, pointedly ignoring the empty spot on the drive where Wendy's car should stand and didn't, she wondered if she even should put a stop to the kindred. He was dangerous, reckless, and he imperiled all of kindred kind with his mission. But his mission felt righteous, to her. She felt his cause resonate within her. Would she do less, if all that remained of those she cared for were the last, stolen generation of them? She didn't think she would, though she told herself she would act with more discretion than he. *If she walks out of the room, I will kill her. I won't be able to stop myself.* Kelly shied from facing that truth, and what it meant for her thoughts of superiority in method to the kindred she pursued.

"Miss Kelly?" Gordon's hesitant voice from the kitchen to the left of the front foyer drew her out of her unpleasant considerations. She looked over at him and saw him shoveling carbs into his body, and a half-finished pitcher of water on the table beside his plate. He rose from the table as she met his eyes. "I...I got the last word in from my contacts. I'm sorry, Miss Kelly. The trail is cold. I can't...get any of the records from the Dream Maker Foundation. I'm

sorry.”

Kelly’s ire spiked, but she choked it violently to death with a steely-grip of control. The smile she pulled onto her lips was a thin mask, but one the ghoul seemed willing to be fooled by. “It’s fine, Gordon. I’m sure you did your best,” she soothed. “I have what I need now, anyways. You did well to get as far as you did.” She didn’t know that was true, but the relief that glowed at her excusing of the failure that Jillian had arranged for him, and the beaming, obsequious smile that greeted her praise, told her it didn’t matter. He had had no real heart in his work, only the fear of disappointing her. Was her keeping of the man really that different than Jillian’s sale of others? He had no more choice in his service than any of those she imagined had been sold into slavery. Kelly turned away and headed up the stairs.

“Miss Kelly?” Gordon essayed from the threshold to the kitchen and drew her up short halfway to the second floor. She stopped and gave a quarter turn to look down at him. The concern etched into his features was obvious and it made her ache. *I don’t deserve that, Gordon*, she thought at him and felt tired.

“Hm?”

“Are you...alright? Can I get anything for you? Do something for you?” he offered hopefully. Kelly’s first attempt at a soothing smile seemed to miss the mark and did nothing to ease the creases of worry in his brow as he gazed up at her.

“I’m fine,” she lied. No kindred would have been fooled by the tone, but Gordon was no kindred and he desperately *wanted* her to be fine. “Go enjoy your food, Gordon. You need to recover your strength.”

He gave a grateful smile up at her to have a task she wished of him and turned back to the kitchen with a murmured, "Yes, Miss Kelly." Kelly watched him go and then turned back to her own task. The sheet of paper in her hand felt as heavy as if it were crafted from lead. It made her steps up the stairs slog. She needed to find the kindred, still, that was true, but she couldn't honestly answer whether it was for herself or the Prince's domain she toiled and hunted. She still needed to see his eyes, and know if they were bright with intelligence or wild with the Beast unleashed. What heart and mind drove a quest for revenge that spanned oceans? Would he recognize in her the same? She shut the door on her (*Wendy's*) office and sat at the desk. She would have her answers, soon, and then she could pull Wendy back to her.

Kelly dialed from memory and put the receiver to her ear. Five rings later the gruff, basso voice answered, "You've got Wrecker. Don't waste my time."

"Such grace and poise," Kelly replied dryly. "No wonder the Blood Brothers are so beloved by all the city's most elegant." Wrecker snorted his laughter.

"Patterson. You never come to play Nines anymore. Too good for us Anarchs now that you're in the top forty on Billboard?"

"I got tired of making you look bad, Wrecker." He snorted his disbelief but she didn't let him continue beyond that. "I need a favor."

"Of course you do," Wrecker answered with thinly-veiled contempt. "Keep us stuck out here in the sticks with only a park and some used condoms to call our own and yet when the shit's hitting the fan, aren't we always the first ones you call?"

They weren't, but the Rabble had such delicate egos. "Only

when I want the job done right, Wrecker.”

“Damned right. Do we at least get to fuck someone up this time?” Kelly couldn’t help but smile slightly. There was a comforting simplicity to Wrecker’s and the Blood Brothers’ forthrightness. They had fewer pretenses of civility, and seemed to enjoy flaunting that to the elders and their agents in the city.

“Probably, Wrecker,” Kelly agreed. “At least some of you, and at least a little. But this isn’t just your average shakedown or protection racket. You’ve been following the news?”

Wrecker grunted. “That Foundation Killer thing? Yeah. Who flipped their lid? Ought to send him a thank you card for how hard he’s tweaked you loyalists’ noses lately.”

Kelly’s smile vanished as she was confronted again with the kindred dismissal of the value of mortals as individuals. Even the Anarchs, vocal as they were about the weak deserving as much say as the mighty, were willing to see the blood of Milwaukee’s people spilled to advance their agenda. She wondered again if it wasn’t she who was the deviant in her disgust for such. “Sweet of you, Wrecker,” she replied coolly. “I need you and a couple of yours to sit on some houses, keep an eye out for him. I’ve got his next targets narrowed down, just need someone to bring him in.”

“Fuckin’ grunt work again, is it?” he sneered into the line. She could hear his fangs in the sound. “Isn’t he gone? I heard he fucked off once it came out the FBI was on his tail.”

“He’s not gone,” Kelly assured him but didn’t bother to explain her surety. How could she, in such a way that he could understand? The Anarchs were useful, in their way,

but she didn't ascribe many cerebral traits to them. At least, not most of them. Eduard and Akawa were a different breed, as far as that went. "You got a pen and paper? I don't want to hear excuses that you were at the wrong house when the shit goes down."

"Just give me the fucking addresses, Patterson," Wrecker snarled. Whatever argument his tone might imply, she heard the *skritch* of pencil on paper as she read off the three addresses from the page. "Alright, we're on it. Call you if we find anything." Kelly acknowledged the promise and disconnected the call. She leaned back in her chair and felt for the kindred. Did he sense the net closing in? Even if he did, she knew it wouldn't stop him. He was driven to any length to see his mission through. As she would be in his shoes, she thought. *I can save her.*

Kelly began to fantasize about Wendy's return. She almost managed to convince herself that if she could bring the kindred down, stop the killings, she could tell Wendy and it would wipe away the mortal's mad demands. She envisioned telling Wendy about the coup, about the Prince praising Kelly's capability in the aftermath, and the smile of prideful appreciation that Wendy would wear in the hearing. She wanted the light of that smile to warm her. All too soon, the reality of the situation re-asserted itself, and Kelly saw not the glow of wonder and love but the pained determination to manipulate Kelly to achieve her ambition. Kelly reached for the phone on her desk again. She might yet convince the mortal to abandon this plan.

Kelly spent the last hours of her night plucking the strings of her webs throughout the city. She made arrangements for her plan and tried not to think too closely about what it would do to Wendy when Kelly finally enacted it. But whatever else it did, it would divert her from this course that would see her dead and risen again by the power of

Kelly's cursed blood. It had to. She fled to her rooms well before dawn and was wrapped in the heavy duvet that never seemed quite enough to dispel the chill from her body when her grave sleep claimed her awareness.

August 14, 1999. 8:05 PM

Kelly woke the next night and rolled out of bed at once rather than confront the cold emptiness of it. Gordon was waiting with his clippers and smock, and for the first time in nights she was glad for the natter of his voice as he worked on her hair and makeup. Downstairs, she could hear Dorst watching a late baseball game, marked by occasional complaints about an umpire's call or a fumbled play. Despite the distraction Gordon provided, she felt her anticipation growing by the minute. When she sent him downstairs to join Dorst for the remainder of the game, he gave her a confused look and protested he had not swept up her shorn locks. Kelly urged him on, and took up the broom herself. She couldn't stand to be idle after her time in front of the vanity mirror, and the sweeping at least gave her a few minutes of busywork with which to occupy herself. He left to join Dorst, but not before Kelly saw the shade of concern back in his features.

Kelly swept and tidied. She tugged on the first pair of jeans she found in her closet and a t-shirt that advertised Guns 'n' Roses. She moved around the grand house as she straightened a painting here, or dragged a finger there to test for dust in the library. The game droned on in the background, and her hand touched the lump of plastic in her pocket as if such a thing could summon life to it. She

worried that the Blood Brothers would spook him, that he would go to ground and disappear until the city grew complacent again. But though the anxiety of that wormed unceasingly through her heart, she wasn't convinced by it. The kindred wouldn't be put off by the watchers, even if he saw them. She was not an inexperienced shooter, and she knew that in the heat of the moment vision tunneled down to the sights and what was beyond them. The kindred's gaze was so focused and had been for a very long time now. She quashed the urge to join in the vigil herself. She had no way of knowing or guessing which of the three addresses would be the one to which he went next, and it would not serve her to wait at one.

She had almost decided to throw caution to the wind, and go out to the carriage house and Astrid, to tempt her entrancement with the Fiend's superhuman beauty and wiles, if only to alleviate the monotony of waiting, when her phone chirped. She glanced at her watch as she dug the device from her pocket. It was almost one. The number on the display read, "Blocked." She connected the call and lifted the phone to her ear.

"Kelly Patterson," she greeted brusquely.

"I know who I'm fuckin' calling," Wrecker snarled into the line. "You can just fucking say hello, you know." Kelly ignored the prick of ire at his disrespectful tone. Dealing with the Anarchs *always* took a special level of self-control, but it was almost beyond her when measured against the fraying of her patience in the waiting hours.

"Is this a good news call, or a bad news call," she asked instead, and clung by a fingernail to cool neutrality.

"Both," Wrecker sniped back. "If you fucking knew what you were sending us to deal with, Patterson, I'm going to shove that pretty head of yours right up your ass."

Kelly's fangs came out at the threat, but she clutched harder to her calm. She couldn't manage to flex the secret muscles that would bring the pointed teeth back out of sight, though. "Spit it out, Wrecker. *My* time as well is not to be wasted."

"We've fucking got him for you is the good news," Wrecker snarled. She could hear he, too, was on the ragged edge of control, if for different reasons. "The bad news is it's going to cost you. Big time. We lost Vandal and Savage. That's two Blood Brothers ashed for your little project, Patterson. How do you plan to make that right?"

"*My* little project? Are you forgetting he was pulling down FBI attention on kindred crimes? This was *our* project, Wrecker." She let his wordless snarl of response fade and then added in a more conciliatory tone than she felt, "I'm sorry you lost people, Wrecker. I don't consider it or them worthless, you know that. Haven't I been your voice in the halls of power, and even gotten a bit of it from the elders for you and yours besides?"

Wrecker was not, however, ready to listen to reason. "Don't you fucking shine me on, Patterson. I could just as easily cut this asshole loose, or else leave him on some rooftop for the sunrise," he raged loud enough that his voice distorted around the edges. Kelly lifted the phone away from her ear a few inches and squeezed her eyes closed. She shook with the strain of controlling her response.

"Wrecker," she soothed. "You don't want to do either of those things. The first one means Vandal and Savage met the Final Death for nothing. The second..." She trailed off, her voice full of lethal implication. "Now, take a breath, calm down, and we can discuss this when you deliver him to the safehouse."

“Safehouse?!” Wrecker snapped abruptly, and ignored her implied threat. “You’re going to keep this fucker *safe*.” Kelly pinched the bridge of her nose. The Brujah was *looking* for reasons to take offense at this stage. She somewhat desperately hoped that Akawa was near to the huge kindred and could talk him off the ledge he was dancing on.

“I’m not,” Kelly grated between clenched teeth. “It’s just a turn of phrase. You’ll see for yourself when you get there, I promise.”

“You *promise*,” he spat.

“Yes, I do,” she answered firmly.

Either Akawa had grabbed his attention, or else Wrecker finally saw a glimmer of reason through the rage. He seemed to relent begrudgingly as he finally answered, “You had better not be fucking with me, Patterson. You do *not* want to fuck with me tonight.”

Kelly gave him the address of the derelict police station at which her end game would play out, and she would finally make Wendy realize the madness of what she had demanded. Wrecker slammed the payphone receiver down. Kelly thought the mortal would come back once she saw, and forget all about this game of hers. She would see that Kelly was right, that she didn’t know what she was demanding, that she was better off in the sheltering curl of Kelly’s protection. *I can save her*.

Kelly looked down at the phone in her hand. Now that she was on the cusp of it, she struggled to dial Wendy’s number. It was a small lie, wasn’t it, to make her think she had won? At least long enough for Kelly to show her the folly of her chosen course. Her thumb sought the digits from memory and with a final, settling moment in which she collected herself, she hit the send button. The phone rang twice

before Wendy's voice answered. It was thick with sleep, still, but not so dozy that she hadn't checked the number before answering. "Are you ready?" Wendy asked her.

Kelly hesitated only a moment before she answered, "Yes." She didn't trust herself to say more, not yet. She listened to the hissing quiet over the line as Wendy let out a gasp of relief. "I am but...But you need to see some things first. You have things you have to do, as well, now. But I'm ready, Wendy. You will have what you want."

Wendy had, in the last months, learned only too well that what Kelly said was not always or even often what Wendy thought she said. The silence stretched out for several more seconds, and then finally a weary Wendy said, "Alright, Kelly. Alright. I...trust you. What do I need to do?"

Kelly hoped that the thrill of victory and hope didn't shine through in her voice. Wendy knew that Kelly didn't want this, and to let those things shine through would destroy her last chance. Whether because of the lingering dregs of sleep or because she was too weary of the game to play it any longer when the end seemed in sight, Wendy didn't seem to hear either in Kelly's voice as Kelly said, "You know the abandoned police station at Bloomfield and 11th line?" Wendy indicated she did and Kelly added, "I need you to meet me there at four."

"That's too late," Wendy shot back at once, an edge of suspicion in her voice. "That's barely an hour before dawn."

"I know, Wendy," Kelly soothed. "But this is the way it will have to be." Wendy hesitated only a moment before she agreed, and Kelly thrilled inwardly. One way or another, at least she would have the woman in arm's reach again. She would have her again, and this aching loneliness and need would finally be shed from her heart, for a little while. The

women signed off and Kelly headed for the sleek car that would carry her safely through the veins of the city.

August 15, 1999. 1:34 AM.

The collapse of the beer industry in Milwaukee had spared few from its decay. Whole neighborhoods were blighted in the wake of the collapse, slowly wilting like flowers in a vase bereft of water and abandoned by those who had once looked upon them with pride and ownership. Lives had spiraled into destitution and poverty, and desperation had given the mortals fangs of their own with which to prey on one another. Neither had the city's infrastructure been spared as the tax base shriveled and shrunk. The block of bungalows into which she drove was much the same as any of the other blighted burbs; here were the graves of hope and family and love. What lived in the shadows and the debris that remained was predatory, and though her car and the wealth it represented brought the attention of hungry eyes, so too was she a predator; those that saw, and hungered, also felt fear and made themselves small lest they draw the attention of the thing that drove the black-shelled monster. A predator survived above all else, and these sensed that in testing themselves against her they would imperil that overarching objective.

There were half a dozen chopped down motorcycles parked in a line at the curb in front of the smog-and-filth-painted building that had once been a seat of law and order in this part of the city. The moon shadow of the building fell across the glossy paint on gas tank and fender, a fist poised to smash down on them. The windowless panes of the building, whose facing still remembered the letters of "Milwaukee Police Department" even after they had been pried down by scavengers, were like the eyeless pits of a

skull's stare. She pulled past them and parked at the curb rather than endure the shattered paving at the near side of the silent parade of machinery. No, the pits were not entirely eyeless, she thought, as her preternatural senses picked up the glimmer of eyeshine from within the shadowed gaps. Wrecker stepped out beside the one remaining door at the short flight of steps that used to lead to the building's front entrance.

The engine clicked and cooled as Kelly stepped into the street. Wrecker stopped halfway to the street, his refrigerator-like bulk folding into a posture of daring, angry rebellion as he crossed his arms and glowered below lowered brows. His bald pate shone nearly as brightly as the eyes that watched from the shadows of the building. Kelly thought, as a lilt of breeze reached her and she closed the door to the car, she could smell the subtle perfume that Clutch wore. She traced it back and met the pair of gleaming eyes. As if shying from the recognition in Kelly's gaze, the eyeshine sank back into the darkness and vanished. Kelly strode for Wrecker.

"You've got him here?" she demanded as she strode toward him. How many times in the last week had she felt like the kindred was just beyond the next door, or around the next corner? Now, he was. All that stood between he and she was a small mountain of a kindred.

"Of course I fucking do," Wrecker sniped. He stepped to the side to block her as Kelly tried to step around him for the building. "Not so fast, Patterson. You still haven't told me how you're going to pay us back for Vandal and Savage. They were two of our best."

They weren't, and she knew it. Savage was, in fact, the least of the Blood Brothers as the youngest of them. For all that

the Anarchs spoke highly of equality despite age, they ordered themselves not so differently than did the Camarilla and Her loyalists. Kelly's fangs came out and she flashed her own anger as she looked up at Wrecker. The top of her head didn't quite reach the line of his nipples, and she felt like she had to peer around the barrier of his massive, folded arms to see his eyes. She subtly stepped back half a step. The kindred was inside, at last within her reach, and with him she could bring Wendy back. Wrecker was strong and fast and vicious, but Kelly felt like a cornered animal and she had put the big kindred in his place before with the power of her dreadful Presence. She didn't want to waste the time on that, tonight. She had to get inside. *I can save her.*

"Cut the shit, Wrecker," Kelly spat between her fangs. "You think Akawa's going to thank you for screwing with me on this? Playing games with the Masquerade is stupid, even for you." His eyes flashed and Kelly tensed, ready, but he didn't reach for the tire iron hooked into his belt. His knuckles cracked as his fists clenched in his folded arms, though. Kelly sensed movement, and cut her glance past the big kindred to track it. The large, black wolf of Akawa's preferred shape slunk from the shadows in the doorway and she cursed inwardly.

"I think Akawa's just fine right about now," Wrecker said with angry superiority. "But I guess it isn't surprising the elders' lapdog Seneschal would try to cow me by invoking a name with rank. Shame that isn't how shit gets done out here in the boonies."

Kelly's own knuckles popped. She could smell the traces of vitae—powerful vitae—on the breeze that seemed to find the chinks in the wall behind the derelict police station and wend through it to escape the sightless eyes out front. The kindred was *right there*. A low growl rumbled in her throat.

If Wrecker heard it, he made no sign.

“Whatever, Wrecker,” she shot up at him, and leaned in to show his size and muscle was not a source of (much) fear. He loomed over her and smirked. “If you’ve got a fucking point, make it. I don’t have time for this.” She glanced at her watch. Wendy would be here in a couple of hours, and she wanted them gone by then. She had to prepare a place for herself for the day, too. And she had to see the kindred’s eyes, and know if they looked like her own.

“Big lady with a full schedule doesn’t have time to make right her spending Blood Brothers like singles at a strip club, boys and girls,” he sniped over his shoulder without taking his eyes from hers. The collective, low hiss from the bones of the building in answer to Wrecker’s goading pulled Kelly’s gaze from his into a sweep across the gleaming discs of eyeshine. A piece of her revolted against the pressure and fought to lash out at the big kindred, but she reined it in. She lifted her eyes back to Wrecker’s and bit her tongue hard enough to draw blood as he turned his smirk back toward her full force.

“You’ve got time,” he asserted. When she didn’t answer, he continued. “We’ve had enough of this table scraps shit you’ve been feeding us this past year. It’s time for you to put your money where your mouth has been. We did this for you, for the *Camarilla*, and we’ve chomped at the bit for months now trying to play nice. The elders still sneer at the mention of us, and I don’t see us getting any invitations to the fancy parties.” Kelly’s glance cut off the one, low snicker that rose in response to Wrecker’s statement. Satisfied, she looked back to him.

“So, what is it you want, Wrecker? We’ve been over this ground before. I’ve bent over backwards to get you your

space and your freedom to rule yourselves as you choose so long as you don't make a mess of the Traditions in the process." And she had. It wasn't that Kelly disliked the Anarchs, but their petulance and tantrums were disruptive and they seemed to behave only long enough to plan their next outburst.

"That's horseshit and you know it, Patterson," Wrecker countered acidly. "But this time you can't put us off. This time, we've got the trump card up our sleeve." He hooked a thumb over his shoulder back toward the building, and Kelly's gaze flicked in that direction against her will. "You want what we fetched for you? Then you're going to pay for it with more than promises and deferrals, this time. We want an Anarch seat on the Council of Primogen."

Kelly almost laughed, but the shocking absurdity of the demand was consumed in the flush of demanding need. "The Anarchs have a seat on the Council. The Black Prince speaks for the Anarchs of Milwaukee."

Too late, she remembered Akawa and cut her glance at him just in time to see the lips curl back and bare the long, white teeth in the wolf's maw of his mouth. The canines extended slowly, threateningly, from that maw as a low growl worked its way up the fur-covered throat. Hackles rose and gleaming golden eyes burned hotly at her. Wrecker leaned in above her a bit, and his smile was both knowing and cruel as he said, very quietly, "You want to say that again, Patterson?"

When Kelly simply met his gaze with her glare, he eased back the inch of loom he'd moved in and continued, "A proper Anarch seat, Patterson. The Black Prince is past his prime and his supporters are decimated. Doesn't matter that he's gotten himself a brand spanking new childe, he's old news. We have been toeing the line for a year now, and it's about time your promises paid out. You want this

asshole, you want to make it right for Vandal and Savage, then you're going to give us a seat at that Council."

All that Kelly truly wanted to give him as answer was a crushing wave of supernatural dread to bring him to his knees so she could deck him without reaching up. But she quashed that urge as strongly as she quashed the one to laugh in his face. She was too close, the kindred was too near at hand, to lose control of the situation now. She gritted her teeth and growled, "And who do you think will sit it, Wrecker? You?" She scoffed, which brought his own fangs out from under his upper lip, but she pressed on. "Akawa, maybe, but even then, what do you think you gain by this? A voice? You have it already, through me and to Lucina's ear directly. Why should Akawa sitting as a Primogen make it any easier for you?"

"Look around you, Patterson," Wrecker countered. "You think easy is what we want? We'd just fuck off to the Free State if easy was what we were after. But the elders only respect their own rules and titles, and it's about damned time the Blood Brothers got the respect we deserve. The fucking Anubi have their Primogen, and we *will* have ours."

"You're asking for more than I can give," Kelly countered, though it galled to do so. "I can't force the city to accept an Anarch Primogen, let alone Lucina to acknowledge one. And certainly not while I'm standing here on the sidewalk."

"Guess we take our ball and go home then," he said and gave a shrug. With a piercing whistle he seemed to give the 'move out' signal. One by one the eyeshine sank back into the shadows of the building. Kelly felt the kindred (*Wendy*) slipping away again and lunged to catch hold of him.

"Wait," she shot. Wrecker lifted a hand over his shoulder and the discs of eyeshine returned. "I can't make it happen

with a snap of my fingers, Wrecker, and you know it. And if *you* don't, Akawa does. But what I can do is give my word to work on it."

Wrecker looked back over his shoulder, and Kelly struggled against the instinctive drive to attack him when he turned his attention away from her. It was only the knowledge that such an attack would almost certainly result in her Final Death, or just as bad her loss of the kindred, that kept her in check. Kelly followed his gaze to Akawa and added for the wolf-formed kindred's benefit, "You know I don't give my word lightly. If I say I'll try, I'll try."

Slowly, the toothy snarl eased, and the golden eyes studied her hard enough that Kelly wondered if he wasn't rifling the contents of her mind. She met the golden gaze levelly and hoped he read sincerity in her stare, and not just the low, smoldering flames of her ire. Finally, the Blood Brother leader gave a barking yip, and Wrecker looked back to Kelly. Kelly met his gaze in turn.

"Alright, Patterson. But work fast. We aren't going to play nice for much longer if we're not seeing real progress." Wrecker gave another, somewhat differently toned whistle and lifted a hand to whirl his fingers in a 'round 'em up' gesture. This time the eyeshine didn't sink into the shadows, but instead preceded the emergence of the denim- and leather-clad figures of the Blood Brothers from the building. Wrecker *almost* pushed past her on the way to his bike, and Akawa, tail up, trotted past without a glance to leap up in front of the huge kindred on the bike.

August 15, 1999. 1:55 AM.

Kelly seethed distractedly as the rolling thunder of their convoy was born and then rumbled off toward their turf to

the South. She waited only long enough for them to disappear around the end of the block before she was running into the derelict building. Her sharp nose brought her unerringly to the kindred where they had left him for her and she slid to a stop as she looked down at him.

He was filthy, and wild-haired, and covered in mud and blood. A mop of tangled, dark hair was matted to the side of his face and head. His clothing was comprised of barely-serviceable rags that he had pulled around himself almost as an afterthought. They were crusted with the memory of blood as well as glistening with the fresher sort that filled the air around him with enticement to her senses. He seemed smaller to her, somehow, than she had glimpsed him in the visions of his victims. The jagged shaft of wood pierced through his breastplate and the heart behind it jutted up, not quite perpendicular to the line of his muscled chest. Even in repose his one arm was clutched in close to his belly, and Kelly saw under the glistening glove of blood that it was twisted and deformed, halfway to a rat's claw under a wrist that seemed too spindly by half. His skin was patchy in places, showing here a glimmer of snake's scale, there a tuft of wiry fur. His scent was full of rot and death and the blood of his most recent victims. Kelly studied him and ached to have his eyes open and look up at her, but the Blood Brothers had forced the lids closed after they'd staked him. Neither would she find in those eyes what she sought to learn, in the state he was in.

Kelly felt the stolen lifeforce swell her muscles with strength as she bent to collect the kindred. She lifted his larger frame awkwardly though without difficulty, and cradled him like a child as she strode deeper into the bowels of the abandoned police station. The tombs would be below, and the holding cells there. That was where the final scene of

her intended drama would play out, and she brought the kindred to set the stage. She found the tombs where she expected to, and with a clang slid the cell door shut on the kindred after she set him inside and stepped out. She reached through the bars and closed her hand around the shaft of wood, and with only a single moment's hesitation in which she quailed at the thought of at last having her desire fulfilled, wrenched it free.

The kindred's transformation was abrupt and complete. He changed from a piteous and wounded animal into a thrashing predator in a blink, and Kelly fell back away from the bars. The stake fell from fingers struck nerveless with shock at the hissing, thrashing animation that returned to the kindred's corpse. The bars shook and dust sifted from the concrete in which they were anchored as his bulk slammed against them. Kelly shrank back against the wall as his good hand lunged out between the bars for her. His snarling hiss was full of pain and rage and thirst, the flipside of the Beast's coin to the fear and flight instinct that threatened to unmoor her own sanity in the moments after her shoulders hit the wall behind her.

Kelly straightened and stepped up to the very limits of the kindred's reach until not quite an inch separated her from the grasping, clutching fingers that stretched through the bars. The kindred lunged and fought and rattled the cage into which she had set him. The light down in the tombs was sparse, but it was adequate to her predator's senses for her to see the eyes that glared at her behind the steel. One of the kindred's pupils showed the dumbbell bulges at either end that she recognized from frogs she had seen in National Geographic magazines, but the other was round and recognizable and familiar. Its dark brown iris shone in the too-large field of white. Spittle and blood splattered against her chest and legs as the kindred continued to rage

in his futile effort to reach her.

Seconds dragged into minutes and Kelly studied him, sought the shifting auras of color that would betray his heart to her. The fear never left her but simmered low and demanding under her need to know, and whether from that distraction or simple failure to invoke her power of second sight, she found none of the auras she hoped to see. Finally, the kindred seemed to realize he would not be able to reach her, and the snarling fit of rage and hunger gradually subsided. He slunk back away from the bars until he had wrapped himself in the shadows in the corner of the cell below the barred window. Kelly strained to see him as he peered back at her. She felt him waiting and watching her, as intently as she did him, a feral kind of patience that would never dim, or dull, but instead wait for ages to pass if that was what it took for him to be free.

“Who are you?” she breathed into the air between them, as if her voice would swing wide the cage were she to speak too loudly. The kindred watched her from the shadows and did not answer. “Goddamn you, answer me!” she demanded abruptly as fear gave way to need. Her fury granted her no more reprieve than did her timidity.

Kelly stepped forward and clutched the bars and raged into the cage behind them, “Who are you! Where are the children? Where is Danny?!”

Like a shot the kindred moved across the confined space and Kelly stumbled back away from him with a low hiss. She was too slow, however, and the good hand closed tightly around her shoulder. The sudden, ferocious jerk of the clutching hand was countered by her own desperate effort to throw herself away from him and the fangs toward which he attempted to drag her. Cloth tore, and nails rent

flesh, and cool night air touched her freshly-wounded shoulder as her shirt sagged, bereft of half of its support. Her shoulders hit the wall, and her palms found it too, trying to pull some of the steady endurance from the concrete into herself as if by osmosis. The pain of the shallow gouges was distant and faded as her blood did its dark work and knit the flesh. The scrap of her shirt fluttered down to the floor of the cell, and the kindred backed into the shadows again.

Kelly slid down the wall until she was sitting on the floor and stared across the space at the kindred. He met her stare. The tick of her watch, and an occasional, wordless and guttural sound from the kindred, marked the passage of minutes. The kindred eased forward a few inches, until his eyes were in the light, until she could study them. It seemed, for a moment, an intentional act, as if he knew what she wanted and was gifting it to her, until she saw that all he had done was shift to a more powerful spring posture. What she saw in his one human eye was not the light of intelligence, but the glossy blankness of the Beast in firm control. There was undoubtedly cunning in that gaze, but it lacked the spark of light she had wondered (*hoped*) if she would see. This, then, Kelly thought, was what came of giving so much of her existence to the protection of her mortals. When they inevitably fell to time or the depredations of the kindred, she would be reduced to this. “Who are you?” she asked again, in a whisper, but expected and received no answer. Her whisper sounded full to the brim with desperation as she asked in a small voice, “Where’s Danny?”

“Danny,” hissed the low voice from the corner and Kelly started up sharply. It was a voice accented thickly in...Russian? Ukrainian? Maybe Romanian. She wasn’t familiar enough with the dialects of that region to place it.

“Yes,” she pressed. “Where’s Danny? Can you tell me?”

The kindred made no reply, just watched her warily from the shadows. He seemed reduced and resigned to being caged. The only thing she saw in his eyes was a cunning watchfulness for his captor’s complacency. What terrible and enduring will would carry this kindred on in a mission it lacked the capacity to understand, she wondered dimly. Whoever this kindred had been, any shred of it that had existed when the moon had risen tonight had been destroyed in his capture and caging. Kelly let her shoulders slump back against the wall, and the back of her head soon followed. She let her eyes slip closed until the kindred seemed to take that as an invitation and threw himself against the bars in another frenzied burst of effort to escape. Or at least, she thought, to reach and kill the one who would cage him. She watched dust from the ceiling sift down into his matted hair until his struggles faded away again, and he returned to his dark corner.

“Would you do it again?” she asked him in a voice that seemed to give the ache in her a sound. “I know what happened, or have guessed most of it. Did you wake from the long sleep to find the destruction, or were you wakened before that?” The kindred watched her with its one shining eye, apparently put off balance by some instinctive understanding in the sorrow and pity oozing in Kelly’s words.

“They took them from under your care,” she told him. “You remember that much, I think. You were supposed to be their...what, guardian? Tribal god? I don’t know, something. Whatever, you had accepted responsibility for them, hadn’t you?”

“Danny,” hissed the voice from behind the bars and

shadows, and Kelly searched the dull gaze there. She found only a feral species of curiosity, an instinctive effort to test the spur that had almost brought her within his grasp. She sighed.

“I’m sorry,” she told the kindred. She wasn’t sure he really understood her words, but she felt compelled to share them. “I know why you did what you did; I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same. Hell, I’ve *done* similar and for less cause. I’m sorry you won’t finish your task. I’m sorry I’m the one who had to stop you. I wish...”

Kelly trailed off. What did she wish? That he had not been lost to Wassail before this moment, perhaps. That he could answer the questions she had for him. That she could have taken up his cause with him and let slip the savagery that would be satisfied only with hot blood spilled in payment for the theft of his purpose. Kelly shook her head, and repeated, “I’m sorry.”

“Danny,” the kindred hissed again, almost as if to taunt her with the promise of something more than his mindless bestiality. Kelly blinked as her vision of the kindred blurred with crimson. She felt the rivulet of her tear track cold and thick over the line of her cheek bone and pool on the edge of falling from her chin.

I can save her. But could she? Was it worth this fate? Kelly met the kindred’s eyes across the dark space and they watched one another. She saw the way his head lifted, as if scenting the air for the traces of the fresh blood scent her tear had birthed. A predator that sensed prey close at hand. Like the mechanical beat of a false heart, her watch ticked away the minutes of the night. She didn’t know why she lingered, but found herself compelled to do so. The kindred had nothing to show her, or teach her, or tell her. Still, she lingered, leaned back against the wall, and

confronted the fate of those who gave in completely to the dark desires that simmered constantly just below the surface of all kindred. Finally, as if sensing Wendy's arrival must be soon, she pushed herself to her feet on the wall. In the cell, the kindred shifted subtly, watched her move, and plotted for his freedom.

Kelly let her gaze linger on him for only a moment longer, and then turned away. She wanted to tell him again that she was sorry, but it would mean nothing to him. The concept of misery, of regret, was gone from his mind. Her words were nothing to him, and she didn't need to speak them to hear them echoing in the chambers of her heart. She walked away from the cell and in search of a space where she could cower from the coming dawn. Today, she thought, she would exist as he did, like a wild animal chased to ground and hiding in the dark places. What a thin deceit her huge house and grounds were in the face of this thing in the cage. The plush upholstery of civilization that covered the core of monstrosity under her—and all kindred's—existence.

She located a storage closet, kicked out the small family of deformed Pabst cans some squatter had left, and dragged piles of debris around the thin seam between door and floor. Her hands and arms were covered in dust, and the smell of rot and garbage was thick in the air, by the time she had cobbled together what she hoped would be shelter enough when the dawn came. From below she could hear the roaring fury of the kindred as he tried to take advantage of her absence to tear down the steel bars of his cage. She heard his bulk slam into them over and over, felt the vibrations through the floor as the steel and concrete struggled to contain the assault. All of a sudden, the sounds of violence from below cut off, and she wondered if he

hadn't finally managed to free himself until she heard the car's engine outside the building die.

August 15, 1999. 3:55 AM

Wendy's slow approach to the abandoned building was cautious and fearful as Kelly moved to meet her at the entrance. She could hear the mortal's heart hammering in her chest, and her breaths coming in thready gasps. She heard the skip of the heart and the catch of breath as Kelly, with her torn shirt and grime- and blood-streaked mien, stepped out of the shadows of the doorway to greet Wendy. Would she look so different to the mortal than the kindred below had looked to her? Those thoughts were drowned out in the pervasive thrill of seeing Wendy again. Kelly was almost drowned in that thrill. Here, at last, her Wendy had returned to her.

"Why are we here, Kelly?" Wendy said by way of greeting as she stopped a dozen feet away from the door where Kelly stood waiting. Kelly could see her gaze ticking around to the grit and ruin in which Kelly was clothed, and saw, too, the questions that went unasked glowing in those living eyes. At first, Kelly found her voice had deserted her. She was overwhelmed by Wendy's vitality and fragility. Wendy pressed her, even as she took half a step away from whatever she saw in Kelly's face. "Kelly?"

"Because you need to see something, Wendy," Kelly managed at last, and hoped that she managed to pitch her tone in the soothing, inviting tones she wanted to find for Wendy.

Wendy's eyes sparked with betrayal and anger and she made as if to turn back toward the car at the curb. "That wasn't the deal. What is this, just some new trick to bring

me to you? Why not just summon me to you if you've ceased to respect my need to be away from you?"

Kelly shook her head and replied in pained quiet, "No, Wendy. Not a trick, and if, after you see, you still demand the Embrace, I'll give it to you."

Wendy hesitated, and blinked against the bright rime of tears that welled along her lids. Kelly could imagine the salty smell of them, though the breeze that would carry such to her brushed against the back of her bare shoulder and neck, and carried instead her scent to Wendy. The mortal looked up at her with searching eyes, and after a long moment said, "I've missed you."

Kelly's eyes closed with the rift of pain the simple truth in the statement opened in her heart. She wanted to blame Astrid, or Lucina, or even Wendy for bringing this situation to this point, but tonight was a night for hard truths, it seemed, and she found only self-loathing for her own selfish manipulations. "I've," she began, but her voice caught in her throat. She cleared the lump and tried again as she opened her eyes. Wendy was a silhouette of life in a veil of shimmering crimson. "I've missed you too, Wendy. More than you can know." Yet, she left unsaid. If Wendy would not turn away, and Kelly granted her the Embrace, she would learn all too well the driving obsession Stefan had gifted her with his blood, and that she in turn would pass on to Wendy. A beat of silence stretched into a second of silence, and then thirty more. Finally, seeing the uncertain fear in Wendy's eyes and knowing her unblinking stare and intensity was the cause, Kelly broke the spell.

"Are you still determined, Wendy? You won't," Kelly cut off. She had almost said 'stay mine.' Instead, she said, "You won't reconsider?"

The mortal wavered for a moment, and Kelly hung over the precipice of uncertainty with her. When Wendy's eyes hardened again, Kelly felt herself plunge. Her heart was in her throat as Wendy said, "I am, Kelly. I can't...be with you anymore, without this."

Kelly nodded, desolate, and held out a hand in invitation. "Alright, Wendy," Kelly said bleakly. When Wendy didn't approach, she pressed, "Please, there isn't much time. If you can face what we will go to look upon and still know in your heart that this is what you want, we have to see to it now."

"What is it?" Wendy wanted to know, but she did take a handful of steps closer to Kelly. She looked at the outstretched hand like a strange dog that might bite her.

"The first truly honest look at the kindred you will have," Kelly answered her, and kept her hand extended patiently. She still hoped Wendy would see what was waiting and flee from it (*from me*), but hope was a distant, dying star in her breast in these last moments of night. When Wendy at last closed the distance between them and put her warm hand in Kelly's cold one, Kelly tried not to think of the touch as the last she would ever have from Wendy.

Together they walked into the derelict building, and Kelly guided Wendy past the shadowed hazards the mortal's eyes were not sharp enough to pick out as they wound their way down into the tombs of the old precinct. There was silence from below, as if the kindred waiting there could sense that prey was approaching and lay in ambush. Perhaps, she considered, the kindred will have freed himself and the two of them would walk hand in hand to their Final Deaths. That, despite the fierce rebellion her instinct fought against the idea, seemed easier than what was to come. "Where are we going?" Wendy asked, with a core of steel under the fearful waver of her voice.

“It’s not far,” Kelly soothed and, in another moment, they were stepping into the barred hallway where the station’s holding cells stood. Wendy squinted in the dim light, her mortal senses unequal to the task of defining the shapes of what was in front of her. Kelly drew her onward, careful to keep her to the far side of the narrow corridor from the barred cells. Kelly could see the coiled form of the kindred, waiting for and warily watching their approach, but she knew Wendy could not. As they came to the front of the kindred’s cell, Wendy’s gasp told Kelly she had at last spotted the kindred.

As if the gasp were the crack of a starter’s pistol, the kindred lunged from the shadows and slammed against the bars. Wendy’s gasp turned to a cry and she stumbled back, tried to pull her hand free of Kelly’s and flee. Kelly held fast and pulled her up into her arms, and clutched her from behind in a tight embrace. “Easy,” she soothed. “Relax.”

“Let me go! What are you doing?” Wendy struggled, but Kelly felt more of the stolen life she fed on fill her with strength and the mortal’s struggles were for naught. The kindred in the cell hissed and lunged for the living heartbeat just out of reach. It was Wendy’s turn to be painted like a Jackson Pollock by the spatter of blood and spittle from the kindred’s fangs and curled lips. She maneuvered the mortal just out of reach of the wight, and held her there until the struggling and cries slowly subsided.

“Look,” Kelly urged when Wendy’s resistance was reduced to perfunctory efforts to free herself from Kelly’s clutching arms. “Look at what you want, Wendy. This is what we are, we kindred. Under the surface of the mask we show to the world, this is what we are. This is what you demand to become.”

Wendy's struggles ceased entirely and though her heart hammered in her chest hard enough that Kelly briefly felt as though her own had stirred once again from its long stillness, she looked. Kelly felt her breaths coming in heaving gulps, but eventually the realization rose through the panic and the mortals' instinctive revulsion of the undead that Kelly was not, in fact, pushing her toward the gleaming, bloody fangs of the raging thing behind the bars. She looked, and Kelly dared again to hope that Wendy would turn away from her demand. The kindred, after a handful of minutes, seemed to realize that the mortal was no more within his reach than had Kelly been, and his frenzy unleashed slowly sublimated back to the cunning patience. He slunk back away from the bars with a passing hiss of threat and sank into the blankets of his shadowed corner once more.

"What," Wendy began, but her voice caught. Kelly heard the gulp of her swallow before Wendy began again. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothing," Kelly replied in a quiet voice. "This is what happens to us when the last of our humanity is gone. This is what we become. This is what is always lurking just under the masks we put on to fool the mortals, and each other. This is the Beast given form." She let a beat pass and then added, "This is what you want me to make you."

"But you aren't..." Wendy began, but trailed off. Kelly answered the implication.

"Not on top of things, no," she said quietly. "But it's always there, just beneath the mask. This is what comes to the surface when I lose control, Wendy. This is what you've glimpsed, but never really understood. And, some night, this will be all that's left of me, if the kindreds' games and politics don't lead me to the Final Death first."

“I don’t understand,” Wendy said meekly. “Why are you showing me this?”

“Because you need to know, Wendy,” Kelly answered firmly. When Wendy pushed against her restraining arms she didn’t fight the mortal’s effort at escape. Wendy stepped out of the hold, but kept half her attention warily on the cage’s bars and stuck close to the wall opposite them. “This part of you, if we go through with this, is what will drive you to kill no matter how much you want not to. Unlike this kindred, until you are like this kindred, you will still face the guilt of those murders despite your having no choice in their commission.”

“*If* we go through with this?” Wendy shot at her sharply, and Kelly felt the pillar supporting her hope crumbling. “I can’t believe you. Even now, you’re just trying to manipulate me, to move me around the board where *you* want me.” Kelly looked away from the fresh pain and anger in Wendy’s eyes.

“Why can’t you see that this,” Wendy said, the anger fading for a desperation so hot and demanding that Kelly’s gaze was drawn back to the mortal’s tearful eyes, “is the least of the deaths I choose between? I don’t want to be without you, Kelly. I love you too much. I can’t stand the thought of life without you, but I can’t stand the thought of living with you as I am. Why can’t you see that it’s not that I don’t know, a bit, and fear what it is I’m asking, but rather that the alternative is worse?”

Kelly couldn’t face the woman’s demanding stare any longer and turned away from her entirely. She felt another rivulet of cold blood skip and scamper through the grime on her cheek, but she choked off the sob that tried to rise along with it. What had she done to Wendy to force this

choice? She had tried so hard to shelter her from the dangers and understandings of what Kelly's world was like. Who was she to deny the mortal her wish, when doing so would be the greater harm? "Alright, Wendy," Kelly said at last, and her voice felt as thick as syrup in her throat. "But I need to know you understand as well as you can. You don't... I can't explain to you what it is that giving you the Embrace will cost me. Please, don't begrudge me whatever shred of hope I cling to until the end."

When Wendy's hand came to rest on her shoulder, it came with the brine scent of tears and the hitching of sobbing breath. "I won't, Kelly. I'm sorry. I'll do what you ask because...because I can't be without you. What do you need me to do?"

"The sun will be up soon," Kelly rasped. She could already feel its lethargy around the edges of her thoughts, and the storage closet she had found seemed impossibly far away. "Keep your distance from the bars, but I need for you to stay here, in the hall, and see what it is that awaits the kindred who greet the dawn. Because you will want to, Wendy, God help me you will want to, but even then, you may not be able. I need you to understand that once this is done, there is no escape."

Wendy's quiet reply brought a sob from Kelly that she couldn't choke back. "There was no escape from the first moment we talked, Kelly. I'll do what you ask."

Kelly nodded and heaved a breath to try to control the breaking of her heart enough to find words. "Spend the day with your father, Wendy. Spend it doing the things you love to do in the sunlight. Today will be the last time you see it." Kelly forced herself to take the single step that would bring her past the reach of Wendy's hand on her shoulder, and so freed herself from the mortal's light but insistent capture.

As she trudged toward the stairs that would take her up to the closet she had prepared, she heard Wendy's quietly determined reply. "I will, Kelly." The words haunted her, echoed in her heart and mind, as she shut the door to the closet and crammed the scavenged debris as a second light baffle from the inside, as well as a wedge against the door being opened. As she bent herself into the tight space against the back wall of the closet, she fought the first wave of weariness that threatened to send her spinning into blackness. She listened to the growing snarls of panic and desperation from the kindred below, and under them the horrified gasp of Wendy as dawn struck the barred windows of the cell. Kelly struggled for awareness, and only held onto it by a fingernail's grip until the stink of burning flesh and the howls of Final Death in the grip of the Red Fear echoed through the empty building and reached her impromptu haven.

August 15, 1999. 8:04 PM.

Darkness gave way to awareness, and for a moment Kelly didn't know where she was. She felt herself bent at the knee and craned with her chin against her chest. She felt a brief swell of panic until she remembered the closet, and found the lingering, smoky stink of the kindred's demise in the air. Kelly stretched torpid limbs and pulled the debris from where she had piled it along the door. She felt as if she moved through a fluid more viscous than water. Her dread of what she would find in the abandoned precinct dragged at her until it seemed she wore a suit of lead. Her senses sharpened with habitual caution as she eased out of the closet, and she found only a single heartbeat in all of the building. It was close, and Kelly tracked it to Wendy's form,

hugging her knees and staring sightlessly ahead from the corner.

“Wendy?” Kelly tried, barely above a whisper. Wendy reacted as if goosed, and gave a cry of surprise that trailed off into a nervous laugh. The laugh was short-lived and died on her lips.

“Sorry, I was just...” Wendy trailed off and shook her head. “It’s always like that? With the sun?” Wendy asked in a voice as haunted as her eyes as the mortal remembered. Kelly nodded. “Have you ever tried, you know...?”

Kelly nodded again. “Once,” she answered in a voice as quiet, if not as haunted, as Wendy’s. She moved across the debris and sank to the floor to lean against the wall next to Wendy. “It was in my first week as a kindred, a few nights after I killed someone for the first time,” she continued. “I thought I couldn’t go on, knowing that I was not only a murderer, but that I would kill again. Stefan was...quite thorough in making sure I knew that it would happen, from time to time.”

Wendy nodded slowly. “And that...whatever, fit, the kindred downstairs had. That’s what stopped you from succeeding?” Kelly nodded again, and Wendy fell silent. “Daddy says hi,” she offered at last, but the effort at a return to the easy chatter they had shared for so many months fell flat. After the awkward silence stretched out for a half dozen seconds, she said at last, “I haven’t changed my mind, Kelly.”

“I know,” Kelly nodded bleakly. She had known from the moment she had heard Wendy’s heartbeat in the building. Had the mortal opted out, she would have fled back to the relative safety of her father’s house and its distance from the nightmarish existence Kelly had dragged her into.

“How does this...How does this work?” Wendy wanted to

know, and Kelly let her eyes slip closed. She bathed in the warmth and life that radiated from Wendy, and hoped that Wendy had seen her last day with the same vicious determination to remember every detail of it. Both of them were about to pass forever beyond the warmth they thrived in.

“You have to die,” Kelly answered quietly. “I have to kill you.”

Wendy trembled, but she only nodded in silent acceptance. What wicked magic had Kelly worked on this woman that she should walk so boldly to her end, just to be with Kelly? And why? Just to have relief from Kelly’s obsessive need to possess her that had festered after Wendy had entranced her? “I’m ready, Kelly,” Wendy answered at last.

Kelly shifted, and Wendy turned to meet her. Helpless to stop herself, Kelly kissed Wendy’s living lips for the last time, and tried to imprint the feel of them on her soul like a brand. The heat of Wendy’s body was like fire against her skin, but she forced herself to face it and drink it in. She finally broke the kiss and pressed her forehead to Wendy’s. Their tears beat a rhythm on the floor between them. “I’ll...make it quick,” Kelly promised, and Wendy nodded as if unable to trust her voice with a more thorough answer.

Wendy eased into Kelly’s arms, and Kelly let her fangs slip their bonds. The mortal’s heart raced like a rabbit’s, and her body shook from head to toe, but she clutched to Kelly’s shoulders determinedly.

“Please,” Wendy breathed as Kelly froze, the points of her fangs just touching the quick pulse of jugular. “Help me be with you.”

Kelly’s heart broke even as Wendy’s skin did under the inexorable plunge of Kelly’s fangs. Blood, hot and sweet

and, even in this moment, satisfying beyond anything she had known in life, pulsed into her waiting mouth. Wendy stiffened with the initial prick of pain of Kelly's bite, and then relaxed into Kelly's grip. Kelly drank.

Even through the burning delight of gorging on blood, Kelly could hear and feel Wendy drifting toward death. Her heart stuttered and chugged, the hot bursts of blood that splashed onto Kelly's tongue slowed. Her breathing, at first deep and lusty with the pleasure of Kelly's bite, quickened and shortened into tiny, hitching gasps that slowed along with the beat of her heart. The strong, determined clutch of Wendy's arms around Kelly's body faltered, and then fell away. Soon, too quickly, Wendy slumped across Kelly's lap and in her arms as she died.

Kelly lifted her head from Wendy's throat and gave a long, wordless cry of anguish up to the uncaring sky. Her body thrummed with the brimming flush of Wendy's blood and the last of the mortal's life tingled through the cells. She was revolted by how elated it made her feel. Another anguished cry slipped past her lips, more like a scream that could never be enough to release the pain erupting in her heart. She cradled Wendy's corpse to her chest and rocked as she wept into the dead woman's shoulder. How could she do this? How could she condemn Wendy to this? Because, she knew, she couldn't be without her. She was willing to murder the woman who loved her just to avoid the loneliness and pain of being without her. Kelly's hand found the back of Wendy's head and she lifted it to her shoulder as she wept inconsolably into the corpse's hair.

August 15, 1999. 10:11 PM.

Kelly looked up after what seemed like an eternity of shapeless, timeless suffering. She gazed down at Wendy's

face. In death, she looked peaceful. There was no shine of pain or determination, no suspicion of Kelly, no dread of what shape the next horrible revelation of Kelly's existence would take. Her eyes were glazed and sightless as they stared up at the ceiling past Kelly's shoulder, half-lidded as if in the final moments of bliss. Kelly pulled the woman back up against her chest and rocked her slowly, unable to face the reality of Wendy's death.

It was not too late to turn aside, Kelly thought suddenly. She could stop, here. Wendy had not died suffering, had in fact died trusting that Kelly would guide her through safely to the other side of the darkness and back to a different species of it. Kelly could leave it at that, and bear the burden of having murdered her lover instead of all those that would come after, all the lives sacrificed to Wendy's dark thirst. She could spare Wendy at the last, if only she could let her go. Kelly sniffled back the last of her tears and lowered the woman to her lap. Wendy sprawled across her thighs, and her head lolled away from Kelly as if even in death she could sense Kelly's thoughts of betrayal and was disgusted by them.

Kelly lifted her wrist to her fangs and bit deeply. She hated herself as she realized she could not let Wendy go, even now, even in the face of what she was about to inflict upon her. With gentle fingers, Kelly urged Wendy's head back into her lap and pressed her gashed wrist to the faintly parted lips. Blood, thick and slow and driven by the urging of her other hand rather than at the beat of a heart, flowed into Wendy's mouth. Kelly pumped her blood into Wendy's corpse until she felt it brim against her wound and a rivulet of it slipped from the corner of the lifeless lips. She squeezed the flow off with a tourniquet made of her own fingers and waited for the blood to ooze down the throat to

make room for the next. She had just started to urge the next flow when Wendy's hands shot to the arm against her lips, and her mouth closed around Kelly's self-inflicted fang wounds.

Swallow after swallow, Kelly fed Wendy the first of her sanguinary banquets. She refused to pull away until she felt her own veins nearly empty of precious vitae, determined that Wendy should not wake ravenous and frenzied as Stefan had forced her to. "Enough," she tried to say at last, but her voice was no more than a thin husk. "Enough!" she repeated, more forcefully, and pulled her arm free. At last, Wendy's eyes opened to Kelly, and Kelly saw wonder and fascination in them as they saw Kelly for the first time as a kindred. She ran her tongue along the gash in her wrists, and tried to pull her fangs back out of sight, but her own thirst raged too fiercely now to allow it.

"You're...so beautiful," Wendy breathed up at Kelly. "I had no idea," she rasped, even as her tongue found the remnants of Kelly's blood on new-grown fang and lip. Wendy's fingers lifted to the blood-streaked cheeks of Kelly's face, and stared in wonder as they came away shimmering and red. "It's so...so good," she husked, and licked Kelly's blood clean with an almost pornographic moan of pleasure. When Wendy's bright, glassy eyes opened again, Kelly could barely stand to look into their hazel depths. She kept expecting them to change back to the warm, living eyes of Wendy the mortal, but they stubbornly insisted on being the glassy, doll-like eyes of Wendy the kindred.

Kelly helped Wendy to her feet, and then sank back to the ground once she was sure the fledgling was steady. She pulled her knees up against her chest and hugged them tightly as she watched, agonized, while Wendy wandered the space and explored a world she had never seen before.

When Wendy doubled over with the first pangs of her new body's full change and the rejection of that which lingered from mortality, Kelly went to her and held her close through the convulsive, screaming expulsion of the last of Wendy's life.

August 16, 1999. 3:13 AM.

Kelly closed the doors to her bedroom softly. Inside, Wendy shuddered through the last aftershocks of her transformation. Her child was only half-aware of her surroundings, too shaken in the pains of birth that had wracked her to cling to full awareness. Kelly's throat was raw from the constant susurrations of soothing sounds she had tried to bathe Wendy in even as she had carried her into the house, washed the remnants of the change from her with a delicate touch and a warm cloth, and tucked the heavy blankets around the fetal-bent form. The lack of her own whispering nothings, as accustomed to them as she had become in the last several hours, lent the silence an unfamiliar ring.

As she started away from the door, her phone chirped. She dug it from her pocket and hit the button to deny the call and send it to voice mail on the third ring. Almost at once, it began to chirp again. She sighed and connected the call. "Kelly Patterson," she grated, cleared her throat, and repeated her greeting more firmly.

"Kelly," Jonas said. The quiet caution in his voice drew her up short only ten steps from the door to her room. The silence hissed on the line for two more seconds and Kelly pressed him.

"What is it?" she demanded, not truly sure she wanted to

know what it was that had wiped away Jonas's bravado and bluster.

"We found the kids, Kelly," Jonas said bleakly. "Turns out one of the Blood Brothers can do that voodoo that you do, and we tracked the kindred back to his haven. They were..." He trailed off and Kelly silently wished he wouldn't say it. "They were drained, Kelly. It looks like maybe he lost control, or else he'd been recovering them just to drink. It's going to take an autopsy to figure out if they all died around the same time or not."

Kelly's eyes slipped closed. *I can save them.* "He didn't take them to drink," Kelly replied quietly, at last. "But he'd gone into Wassail before he got to me. I guess he lost control before he went to try to hit the next on the list."

"Yeah," Jonas said. "Anyways, I thought you'd want to know."

"I appreciate it, Jonas," she lied, and disconnected the call. She looked back over her shoulder at the soft sounds of suffering that slipped from through the closed doors. She ached, her thirst burned, she felt filthy inside and out. But, above all, she felt a single truth ringing through her.

The kindred had, in trying to cling to his attachments and purpose, been the one to destroy them. She and he were no different, she knew with every part of her. She wore a mask over what she was, which in the end the kindred had cast aside, but they were both the instruments of their own demise. She, as he and all kindred did, destroyed whatever they touched.

Afterword

Special Thanks

I would like to take just a moment and give thanks to all the great content creators that have worked on Vampire over the years. You have all, in your way, inspired so many with your ideas and characters and vision.

I would like to thank the Storyteller's Vault as well for providing an opportunity for others to share their stories and dreams (or nightmares) of the World of Darkness.

I would like to thank Jen, for her patience with my writing and the monumental effort it took to tidy it up.

Most of all, I'd like to thank you, the reader, for joining me on this leg of Kelly's existence. I hope that she has captured your heart as thoroughly as she has mine.



Duty's Consequence

When Kelly Patterson was appointed to The Mask, it seemed like the perfect distraction from her sire's abandonment, and a way for the Toreador neonate to prove her loyalty to clan and Camarilla. Tasked with protecting the Masquerade and granted sweeping powers to do so, she was instrumental in exposing, and ultimately destroying, the very Prince Merik who appointed her.

Now, almost a year later, The Mask is called upon to once again investigate and put a stop to a series of grisly murders that threaten the Masquerade and the safety of the kindred in Milwaukee. As the pressure and publicity grows, Kelly must confront and understand the nature of her new prey, and so bring it to ground, even as she must reconcile what her loyalty to the Camarilla and her Prince means.

As Kelly struggles to balance the demands of her heart, her ties to the mortal world, and her duty, she will come to understand that beauty is not the only thing that lies in the eye of the beholder; sometimes, evil does, too.

